

**THE (UN)MAKING OF SOVIET KIROVABAD:
POGROMS AND THE END OF THE “FRIENDSHIP OF PEOPLES”
IN AZERBAIJAN**

By

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ABSTRACT

Armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is often seen as a precipitating factor that hastened the Soviet Union's collapse, but few studies have analyzed how the dissolution of Soviet authority unfolded on the ground. This thesis takes an important step in that direction by focusing on the unraveling of ethnic pluralism in a single city in Soviet Azerbaijan. The following chapters tell the story of Kirovabad (present-day Ganja)—the second-largest city in the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic—before, during, and after a series of pogroms in November 1988 initiated the mass exodus of some 40,000 Armenians. Though located outside the enclave of Nagorno Karabakh (a majority-Armenian autonomous region within Azerbaijan that became highly contested in 1988), Kirovabad experienced the fallout from this territorial dispute, and its depopulation sheds light on the dynamics of mob violence and the construction of difference that persisted after the riots dissipated. To reduce the scale of analysis to the municipal and street level allows one to capture the processes—such as governmental inaction, mass rallies, belligerent speeches, and the circulation of rumors—that enabled violence in Kirovabad and elsewhere. Zooming in reveals how seemingly spontaneous outbursts of primordial hatred were, in fact, not of this nature, but rather the result of a chain of precipitating events and cumulative pressures that prompted crowds of Azerbaijani men to brutalize Armenians. Moving beyond essentialist theories of ethnic conflict to address the convergence of historical memories, institutional legacies, and contingencies that polarized Armenians and Azerbaijanis in the twilight years of Soviet rule, this thesis seeks to demonstrate how the city's violent breakdown epitomized the disintegration of mixed communities in the South Caucasus.

Drawing on the testimonies of current and former residents of Kirovabad, this thesis also explores the zones of social interaction and the shifting, context-dependent role of nationality in

everyday life in the decades preceding the pogroms. Rather than assume that mutual antagonism was an intrinsic feature of their lives, the present study seeks to highlight the sense of solidarity that united Armenians and Azerbaijanis as Soviet citizens inhabiting the same space, while uncovering the sources of tension that at times divided them. Though “indigenization” policies privileging Azerbaijanis from the 1960s onward alienated many Armenians, only the pogroms in 1988 permanently separated residents whose lives had been intimately intertwined. Since the Armenians’ flight and the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, multiethnic Kirovabad has transformed into the distinctly Azerbaijani city of Ganja through the rewriting of history and the nationalization of urban space. Analyzing monuments, museums, and a textbook in Ganja as a window on nation building in Azerbaijan, the thesis argues that selective remembrance and active forgetting are among the lasting legacies of the pogroms.

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In closing, I dedicate this thesis to my good friend Evan Douglas Lounsbury (1988-2011) whose affinity for languages and curiosity about the world continue to inspire me to keep traveling. Of all my friends, he would have understood best the value of leaving Kentucky to study in Budapest and write about a faraway place like Kirovabad. What follows is a small but heartfelt tribute to his memory.

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Fig. 1: Map of the Late Soviet Caucasus

[Source: Arthur Tsutsiev, “1957-1990: Stability and Conflict under ‘Developed Socialism,’” in *Atlas of the Ethno-Political History of the Caucasus*, trans. Nora Seligman Favorov (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 104.]

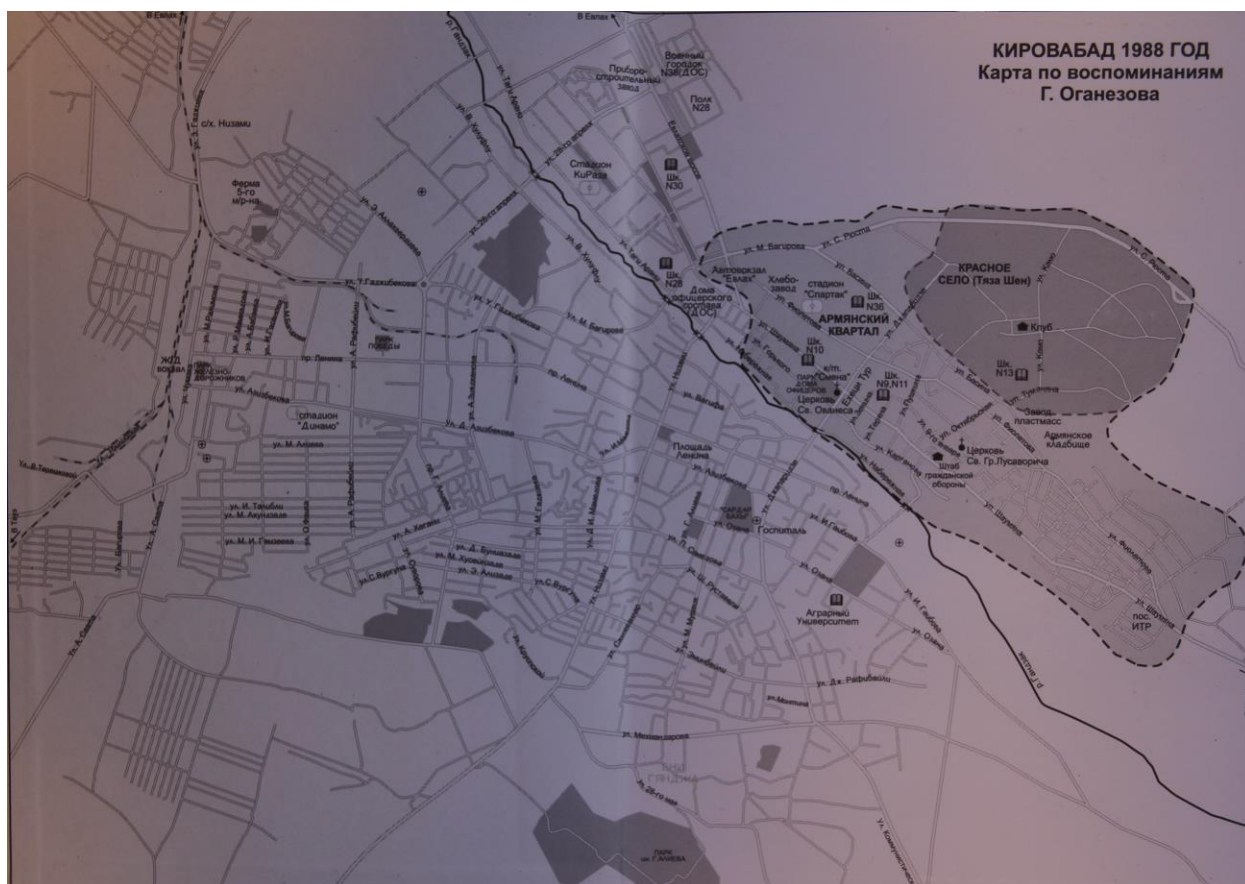


Fig. 2: Map of Kirovabad in 1988

[**Source:** Grigorii Oganезov and Hranush Kharatyan, *Samooborona armian Kirovabada v 1988-1989 gg. glazami ochevidtsev* [*The Self-Defense of the Armenians of Kirovabad in 1988-1989 through the Eyes of Witnesses* (Yerevan: Gitutyun, 2014), inside jacket cover]

INTRODUCTION

Situating Kirovabad

The ghosts of Soviet Kirovabad continue to haunt modern-day Ganja, Azerbaijan's second-largest city of 320,000 inhabitants that reverted to its former name after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.¹ What was once a multiethnic center of Soviet industry in western Azerbaijan is now a mono-ethnic city fashioning itself as a distinctly Azerbaijani cultural capital. As Ganja's population erects monuments to national heroes and reinterprets its history through a national lens, it also excludes other groups from public memory. Among the missing chapters in Ganja's grand narrative is the story of Armenians who once inhabited the city in large numbers—upwards of 40,000 by 1988.² Indeed, few traces remain of a historical Armenian presence in the city aside from two derelict churches standing in what was the Armenian quarter for much of the twentieth century. Flanked by a tea garden and a makeshift barbershop, the central church, Saint Grigor Lusavorich (see Figure 3), still looms over the surrounding



Fig. 3: Armenian Church [St. Grigor Lusavorich] in Ganja (author's photo, February 2013)

¹ According to official data, the population of Ganja in 2009-2012 was estimated at 320,700. See Arthur Tsutsiev, "Appendix 2: Major Cities in the Caucasus," in *Atlas of the Ethno-Political History of the Caucasus* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 176.

² This is an approximate figure according to a 1979 population census, cited in Grisha Oganezov and Hranush Kharatyan, eds., *Samooborona armian Kirovabada v 1988-1989 gg. glazami ochevidtsev* [*The Self-Defense of the Armenians of Kirovabad in 1988-1989 through the Eyes of Witnesses*] (Yerevan: Gitutjun, 2014), 93.

neighborhood, while the other, smaller church, described as an “Albanian temple” (*Alban mabadi*) in the local history museum, supposedly now functions as a music hall.³ These hulking reminders of a troubled past have blended into the surrounding cityscape over the years despite their incongruous appearance. Local residents nonchalantly refer to the upper section of Ganja as the “second part” (*vtoraia chast*) where Armenians resided, but the sudden departure of Kirovabad’s largest minority in the waning years of Soviet rule is conspicuously absent from accounts of Ganja’s history.

A general silence hangs over those fateful years of 1988-89 when a growing conflict over control of Nagorno Karabakh—a neighboring, majority-Armenian autonomous region within Azerbaijan—spread to the streets of Kirovabad. Karabakh Armenians’ demands to transfer the disputed territory from Azerbaijan to Armenia in February 1988 initiated a wave of mass protests and counter-protests in both republics that placed Mikhail Gorbachev’s reformist policies of *perestroika* (“restructuring”) and *glasnost* (“openness”) under enormous strain. As nationalist rhetoric and competing claims to sovereignty in Nagorno Karabakh intensified, Kirovabad witnessed a series of unprecedented anti-Armenian pogroms starting on November 21, 1988 that catalyzed the disintegration of Soviet power in Azerbaijan.⁴ In the following weeks and months, Kirovabad’s entire Armenian population fled the republic as enraged crowds of Azerbaijani men beat Armenian residents and ransacked their homes, while the local authorities mostly stood aside. Exploring how this ordinary city experienced such extraordinary violence, and how Kirovabad’s implosion exemplified the unraveling of ethnic pluralism in the South Caucasus, forms the crux of the present study.

³ Here the term “Albanian” does not denote the Albanians of southeastern Europe, but a little known group that inhabited parts of eastern Transcaucasia in antiquity.

⁴ For a concise overview of the political struggle over Nagorno Karabakh in the late 1980s, see Ronald Grigor Suny, “Nationalism and Nation-States: Gorbachev’s Dilemmas,” in *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 127-62.

Few researchers writing about the late Soviet Caucasus have attempted to root their analyses of nationalism and violence in specific locales. While policy-oriented studies and journalistic accounts have dominated the literature on the Caucasus, relatively few scholarly works have considered the “experiential dimensions” of everyday life and conflict at the local level.⁵ The following chapters aim to do precisely that by looking closely at the fate of a single city and its residents, drawing on memoirs, oral histories, and local newspapers to understand how Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived through and remember those tumultuous years. Recently, a number of sophisticated studies have documented the events of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict (1988-1994) in meticulous detail using a range of sources such as government decrees, newspapers, extensive interviews, and eyewitness reports.⁶ These works have made a significant contribution toward understanding a disastrous war long overshadowed by the breakup of Yugoslavia, but they have painted broad brushstrokes in an effort to chronicle the entire war or to synthesize comparative case studies. One learns that Armenians and Azerbaijanis mobilized into national movements, struggled fiercely over territory, and brutalized and killed each other, but one is left wondering how it all developed on the ground. How did mixed communities become polarized to the point where living together was no longer conceivable? How did Armenians and Azerbaijanis react to the shifting political landscape that accompanied the withering of Soviet institutional authority? What series of events prompted hundreds of thousands of civilians to abandon their homes and move to their titular republics? Only by

⁵ Bruce Grant and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, “Introduction,” in *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories and the Making of a World Area*, eds. Bruce Grant and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2007), 5.

⁶ A comprehensive list will not be provided here, but a few noteworthy titles include: Vicken Cheterian, *War and Peace in the Caucasus: Russia’s Troubled Frontier* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011); Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, rev. ed. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013); Tatul Hakobyan, *Karabakh Diary: Green and Black, Neither War nor Peace* (Antelias: Lebanon, 2010); Christoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2007).

embedding these discussions in a local context such as Kirovabad can one begin to grasp how these processes unfolded and how ordinary people responded to the forces reshaping their lives.

In this respect, Kirovabad is an ideal candidate for further study precisely because fragmentation was not an inherent feature of life in the city before 1988. Inspired by works such as Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors* (2001), Edward H. Judge's *Easter in Kishinev* (1992), and Shimon Redlich's *Together and Apart in Brzezany* (2002)—all of which document the outbreak of anti-Semitic violence in ethnically heterogeneous localities—I investigate how and why pogroms occurred in a place where Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived and worked together for nearly 70 years as neighbors, friends, and colleagues. The case of Kirovabad is perplexing indeed, for there was little indication prior to 1988 that violence would one day shatter the local *modus vivendi* that seemed indestructible to most residents. For decades, life was rather unremarkable in this city near the foothills of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains: Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and other nationalities lived and toiled together on collective farms and in the local carpet and aluminum factories; residents paid homage to Lenin as well as the legendary medieval poet Nizami Ganjavi in official ceremonies and theater performances; and local newspapers lauded achievements in socialist labor and praised the inviolable “friendship of peoples.” The fact that virtually no major disturbances or clashes occurred until 1988 speaks to not only the coercive power of the state, but also to the marginal importance, perhaps even the irrelevance, of nationality in most everyday interactions. To be sure, Armenians and Azerbaijanis had their points of contention, but there was no expectation that they would not continue to live side by side as they always had.

What is telling, however, is that this ordinary city, seemingly immune to interethnic strife, was later caught in the whirlwind of violent demographic reshuffling that accompanied the erosion of Soviet power across the South Caucasus. Compared to other cities in Azerbaijan such

as Sumgait and Baku—sites of deadly pogroms against Armenians in February 1988 and January 1990, respectively—casualties were significantly lower in Kirovabad, but the consequences were equally tragic.⁷ Repeated acts of violence divided residents along national lines that rendered the prospect of reconciliation all but impossible in an atmosphere of deep mistrust. If Kirovabad had symbolized the ideal vision of Soviet society before November 1988 as a purported bastion of Soviet internationalism, the pogroms heralded the triumph of ethnonational chauvinism and the crystallization of enemy images. Kirovabad’s implosion typified the “unmixing of peoples” because similar patterns of depopulation occurred in nearly every urban center between Baku and Yerevan as Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities, facing intimidation and serious threats to their lives, sought refuge in their “home” republics.⁸ To tell the story of Kirovabad is therefore to paint a portrait of a city, and a region, in a profound state of crisis.

What do researchers stand to gain by redirecting their attention to localities and incorporating overlooked voices? Taking a cue from practitioners of microhistory, I propose that adjusting the scale of investigation allows one to reconceptualize violence to account for contingencies, cumulative radicalization, pivotal moments, and individual responses crucial for understanding how a place like Kirovabad fell apart.⁹ Inspired by the call to “recover complexity,” this thesis examines Armenian-Azerbaijani relations at close range in order to rethink theories of ethnic violence that stress enmity without contextualizing or problematizing

⁷ According to the most reliable estimates, the final death toll in Kirovabad was ten victims, including three Soviet soldiers. See Oganezov and Kharatyan, eds., “From the Authors,” in *The Self-Defense of the Armenians of Kirovabad*, 8.

⁸ This phrase is taken from Rogers Brubaker, “Aftermaths of Empire and the Unmixing of Peoples,” in *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building, The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires*, eds. Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 155-80.

⁹ For a cogent defense of microhistory and its ability to illuminate macro-scale phenomena, see Francesca Trivellato, “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?” *California Italian Studies* 2.1 (2011).

it.¹⁰ Similarly, the testimonies of current and former residents of Kirovabad featured in the following chapters add greater texture and nuance to a period largely associated with intercommunal bloodshed, urging the researcher to ponder the intricacies of life in Kirovabad before plunging into the cataclysmic events of 1988-89 as if they were somehow inevitable. Being attentive to local scenarios and individual voices proceeds from the conviction that “microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved” in accounts that analyze violence with a wide-angle lens.¹¹ Focusing on what actually happened on public squares and neighborhood backstreets as the drama unfolded and how residents reacted to the growing unrest in different ways—by participating in mass rallies and pogroms, building barricades and defending themselves, sheltering neighbors, or simply standing aside—reveals the divergent courses of action residents took amidst the breakdown of municipal order. Thus, the important observation that “looking locally makes one keenly aware of difference” calls for a nuanced interpretation that acknowledges a wide spectrum of action even within a small, bounded space.¹²

Thesis Road Map

The next chapter elaborates on the theoretical arguments underpinning the thesis, but before proceeding further, a few preliminary remarks regarding the content of the substantive research chapters are in order. While much of the thesis focuses on violence and displacement in Kirovabad, chapter two, “Voices from Kirovabad: Everyday Encounters and Disjunctures in the City (1956-1988),” dwells at length on lived realities before the calamitous years of 1988-89.

¹⁰ I borrow this phrase from the title of Giovanni Levi’s article “Microhistory and the Recovery of Complexity,” in *Historical Knowledge: In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence*, eds. Marjatta Rahikainen and Susanna Fellman (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 121-32. Scholars of everyday life in Russia have also observed that “a radically reduced view of local life can cause us to rethink our conceptions of macrohistorical processes.” See Choi Chaterjee et al., eds., “Introduction: The Genesis and Themes of *Everyday Life* in Russia,” in *Everyday Life in Russia: Past and Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 6.

¹¹ Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 97.

¹² Leslie Peirce, “Introduction,” in *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 12.

The turmoil of 1988 may appear to be the culmination of long-simmering tensions, but viewing interethnic relations through the prism of later conflict is misleading. Nationality was not always a salient feature of Kirovabadians' daily lives, and Armenians and Azerbaijanis often identified as Soviet citizens of an internationalist state rather than as members of separate communities. That is not to say that Kirovabad was a site of seamless intermingling. One must consider, for example, that Armenians lived primarily, though not exclusively, in a separate district across the Ganjachai River from the city center, and that policies privileging "titular nationals" (Azerbaijanis) generated resentment among many Armenians. In short, this chapter maintains that descriptors such as "fractured" or "cosmopolitan"—concepts that reduce social experience to a permanent state of being—do not convey the complexity of life on the ground in Kirovabad.

Turning to the critical juncture of 1988, chapter three, "The Unmaking of Kirovabad: Pogroms in a Soviet City (1988-89)," chronicles Kirovabad's downward spiral, focusing on the precipitating events that triggered pogroms against Armenian residents. The pogroms were not well-planned operations directed from above, but bloody offshoots of political rallies in Kirovabad's central square that continued for days on end as participants honed their tactics and the local administration failed to intervene. The pogroms polarized Kirovabad into two opposing camps and solidified national differences in a way that made prolonged cohabitation impossible. Trauma and years of war after the exodus of Armenians from Kirovabad nurtured radically divergent perspectives among Armenians and Azerbaijanis about the events of 1988 that attest to the durability of enemy images and ethnonational categories forged through violence.

After juxtaposing the contrasting narratives of Armenian and Azerbaijani respondents, chapter four, "From Kirovabad to Ganja: Postwar Nation Building and Collective Memory," traces nation-building efforts in Azerbaijan in the postwar period using Ganja as an exemplar.

From public monuments to museum displays to a high school history textbook, this chapter examines the pervasiveness of state-sanctioned historical narratives glorifying Azerbaijan's illustrious past and its current leaders while vilifying Armenians. The mass flight of Armenians and the collapse of the Soviet Union facilitated the nationalization of space as reflected through changes in street names and the proliferation of statues and other sites of memory dedicated to national heroes. Remnants of Ganja's multiethnic heritage remain in the form of churches, but the city's transformation into a distinctly Azerbaijani urban center is unmistakable. Bringing the thesis to a close, the concluding section, "Coda: Beyond Kirovabad," offers reflections on the importance of revising macro-level theories of nationalism and violence using local contexts, and of distilling the layers of memory embedded in interviewees' testimonies.

1. RETHINKING SOCIETY AND VIOLENCE IN LATE SOVIET AZERBAIJAN

Beyond “Ancient Hatreds”

Before setting out, one must dispel a few lingering myths surrounding the origins of violent conflict in the late Soviet Caucasus. The contention that the Kirovabad pogroms were the product of deep-seated interethnic hostility is a specious argument that overlooks the historical context in which they unfolded and reifies the propaganda of ethnic entrepreneurs.¹³ Multiple wars fought over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have reinforced the image of the Caucasus as an inherently unstable region where violence is endemic. However, understanding the Caucasus as a perennially turbulent borderland runs the risk of overstating the incompatibility of its diverse peoples and of assuming that cleavage is an innate characteristic rather than a historical contingency. The claim that the Soviet Union simply “froze” ethnic conflicts such as Nagorno Karabakh that later erupted as central authority evaporated in the 1980s fails to address how Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived before that point and what developments on the ground led to the outbreak of violence. Accordingly, the following pages propose a more nuanced way of thinking about violence in the late Soviet period that accounts for the complex backstory preceding the Kirovabad pogroms, as well as the particular situations that activated and magnified latent tensions.

Embedding the story of national mobilization in a specific locale, I aim to trace the ways in which institutional and contingent factors, not age-old enmities, led to the violent unraveling of a multiethnic city. Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Kirovabad were not predisposed to clash

¹³ For a recent study that challenges such paradigms about conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, see Behlül Özkan, “Who Gains from the ‘No War No Peace’ Situation? A Critical Analysis of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict,” *Geopolitics* 13.3 (2008): 572-599.

simply because they had in the past. Instead, a convergence of forces—including the cumulative effect of Soviet nationalities policies, the Communist Party’s waning influence at the local level, the escalating tensions over Nagorno Karabakh, the stories and rumors of traumatized refugees, and residents’ insecurity about their future—led to a severe rupture that destroyed what had been a tight-knit community. Rejecting the dubious idea of “ancient hatreds” as a sufficient explanation for the conflicts that accompanied the collapse of Communist Party rule across Eurasia, this thesis supports Katherine Verdery’s assertion that “historical enmities must be analytically carried into the present: their continuity cannot be simply presupposed.”¹⁴ Previous conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, for example, in 1905 and 1918-1920 (see next chapter), although horrific and persistent in popular memory during the Soviet era, did not predetermine the bloodshed of 1988. Peaceful relations were the norm in Kirovabad for nearly 70 years, and when the city’s multiethnic fabric finally began to unravel it was not simply the result of Azerbaijanis turning on their lifelong Armenian neighbors out of some built-in antipathy.¹⁵ One must examine how ethnic entrepreneurs exaggerated hatred and manipulated the memory of past atrocities, and then pinpoint the moments when such hostile discourse became salient. For when one unpacks narratives of ethnic discord, it becomes clear that antagonism is not centuries old, but in fact “shrouded in the mists of the twentieth century.”¹⁶

Equally problematic is the view that nationalist passions were smoldering throughout the late Soviet period. Nationality, in many ways, was a non-factor in people’s everyday lives in

¹⁴ Katherine Verdery, “Nationalism and National Sentiment in Post-socialist Romania,” *Slavic Review* 52.2 (Summer 1993): 194.

¹⁵ As tensions mounted over Nagorno Karabakh in the late 1980s, western journalists, particularly American correspondents, provided superficial ethnic and religious explanations that largely neglected the underlying political struggles driving the conflict. For a brief survey of these media reports and their tacit assumption “that ethnic enmity is inherent in ethnic difference itself,” see Mark Saroyan, “The Armenian Protests: Is It Passion or Politics?” in *Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Edward W. Walker (Berkeley: UC Berkeley, 1997), 205.

¹⁶ David D. Laitin and Ronald Grigor Suny, “Armenia and Azerbaijan: Thinking a Way Out of Karabakh,” *Middle East Policy* 7.1 (October 1999): 146.

Kirovabad. Although the Soviet government reinvigorated its indigenization campaign (see below) in the republics, Armenians and Azerbaijanis did not cease to be Soviet. Kirovabadians were conscious of their nationality, but their testimonies suggest that they were more apt to see themselves as Soviet citizens who paid little heed to national differences. Drawing on pioneering studies that seek to go beyond the national paradigm, I consider other vectors of community and identity that existed at the local level and reflect on the extent to which residents were indifferent to ethnicity/nationality.¹⁷ By exploring what Brubaker terms “everyday ethnicity”—the daily scenarios in which ethnonational identity becomes pronounced and when it is insignificant—I attempt to illustrate how the sense of being Armenian or Azerbaijani was an “*intermittent phenomenon*” that did not structure residents’ lives at all times, while calling attention to the “non-ethnicized ways of seeing and being” in Kirovabad.¹⁸ Viewing Kirovabad retrospectively through the lens of the pogroms can mislead one into thinking that nationality was of paramount importance. Whatever national tensions may have existed below the surface only boiled over once political grievances became “ethnicized” and Soviet authority receded from the scene.

With these considerations in mind, the following chapters approach seemingly clear-cut instances of ethnonationalist violence with caution. Rather than subscribe to the idea that fully formed nations are prone to clash, this thesis asserts just the opposite: that nationhood is forged and reinforced through violence. In Kirovabad, ethnonational difference was rather unimportant until physical confrontation and grassroots mobilization reinforced residents’ self-identification as Armenian or Azerbaijani. This heightened awareness of national belonging during moments

¹⁷ Two recent studies in particular have influenced my approach: Maike Lehmann, “Apricot Socialism: The National Past, the Soviet Project, and the Imagining of Community in Late Soviet Armenia,” *Slavic Review* 74.1 (Spring 2015): 9-31; and Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 69.1 (Spring 2010): 93-119.

¹⁸ Rogers Brubaker, “Categories” and “Introduction,” in *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 208, 15.

of crisis lends support to Rogers Brubaker's idea that "groupness may be more the result of conflict (especially violent conflict) than its underlying cause."¹⁹ Following Brubaker's lead, this thesis treats nationhood not as an artificial construct but as a contingent "event" that "*happens*," a sense of belonging that is activated or crystallizes in certain contexts.²⁰ This line of reasoning seems particularly appropriate for describing mass rallies in Kirovabad's Lenin Square and the pogroms, which accentuated local residents' self-identification as Azerbaijanis or Armenians. As I seek to demonstrate the mechanisms that solidified communal boundaries, however, I consciously avoid portraying nations as agents, "as if they were internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes."²¹

Yet even as this thesis challenges the idea of nations as actors, it shows how individuals are prone to view members of another national group as one undifferentiated bloc when the existence of the former appears to be under threat. During the pogroms in Kirovabad, being Armenian meant being marked, which compromised one's personal security and limited mobility regardless of profession, reputation, or personal connections. Building on Stuart J. Kaufman's concept of the "myth-symbol complex," I show how negative images of the Armenian or Azerbaijani "other" as the timeless oppressor became magnified in an atmosphere of heightened national mobilization.²² That such imagery would gain wide currency and initiate a downward spiral of violence was not foreordained—a number of outcomes were still possible even as relations deteriorated—but vilification of the "other" resonated with many Armenians and Azerbaijanis who now felt embattled and uncertain about the future. They may have harbored

¹⁹ Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups," in *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²² See Stuart J. Kaufman, "The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War," in *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 15-48.

misgivings about each other in years past, but only now had this uneasiness come into stark relief. Kirovabad's polarization into national communities, though a direct result of the pogroms, also stemmed from other processes underway for some time.

Nation Building in the Late Soviet Period

At first glance, the rising tide of nationalism in the late 1980s appears to confirm the theory that the Soviet Union could not prevent national passions from boiling over, yet this perspective seems to suggest that the Soviet state suppressed national orientations in previous decades. This mistaken assumption neglects the processes through which Soviet nationalities policies nurtured the idea of national territories as "homelands" that belonged to titular nations.²³ Since its foundation in 1922, the Soviet Union actively promoted national cultures and national languages, created thousands of national-territorial units, and formed native Communist Party cadres as a means of defusing national chauvinism and building socialism.²⁴ A number of scholars have explored the ways in which the Soviet state pursued this seemingly counterintuitive policy of supporting non-Russian populations in the 1920s-30s to cement its power in the former imperial borderlands.²⁵ Until recently, however, scholars drew little attention to the long-term legacies of these *korenizatsiia* ("indigenization" or "nativization") campaigns that regained momentum in republics like Azerbaijan in the decades after the Second World War. Efforts to create a consolidated, supranational Soviet nation in the postwar period were

²³ For the most convincing argument about the popular resonance of national "homelands" in the late Soviet period, see Robert J. Kaiser, "Political Indigenization and the Disintegration of the USSR," in *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 325-77.

²⁴ For a succinct overview of Soviet nationalities policies, see Terry Martin, "Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism," in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, eds. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67-92.

²⁵ The following are among the most prominent studies: Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53.2 (Summer 1994): 414-452; and Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999).

unable to supplant national orientations, in part, because “under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, much authority was surrendered to the local national elites that ran republics, particularly in Central Asia and Transcaucasia, as fiefdoms to be exploited for the benefit of the local party aristocracy.”²⁶ Instead of gradually eliminating national identities, then, “Party rule reified and institutionalized the ethnonational principle,” leaving it intact for the entire duration of the Soviet period.²⁷ The Gorbachev years are often regarded as the point when nationalism emerged on the Soviet periphery, but in reality, the nationalization of Soviet republics began much earlier.

Building on this line of argumentation, the present study illustrates how indigenization policies accelerated in Azerbaijan in the decades of “late socialism” and had tangible consequences for communities like Kirovabad where Armenians’ access to higher positions was limited. It facilitated a process of Armenian and Russian outmigration from Azerbaijan and inculcated the idea among many Azerbaijanis that their republic belonged to them. Although most Armenians continued to lead normal lives in Kirovabad during the Brezhnev years (1964-82) despite these policies, there was a sense of frustration among them that Azerbaijanis enjoyed special privileges as titular nationals. A shared allegiance to the Soviet state continued to unite them, but the parallel process of nativization complicated the goal of building a single Soviet people (*narod*). The persistence of national territories, in which regional leaders had considerable autonomy to build national bureaucracies and celebrate national cultures within their borders, entrenched the national idea. As the major constituent units of the Soviet Union, national republics supplied a “durable institutional frame” that fostered “the long-term cultivation and

²⁶ Ronald Grigor Suny, “Nationalism and Nation-States: Gorbachev’s Dilemmas,” in *The Revenge of the Past*, 130.

²⁷ Katherine Verdery, “Nationalism, Postsocialism, and Space in Eastern Europe,” in *Social Research* 63.1 (Spring 1996): 81.

consolidation of national administrative cadres and national intelligentsias.”²⁸ Contrary to the expectations of Marxism-Leninism, the last decades of Soviet rule witnessed not the merger of nations into an overarching Soviet identity, but the development of “more fully formed nations with their own nationalistic elites in a position to take control of their homelands.”²⁹ It is therefore little surprise that nationalism emerged with such force when Gorbachev introduced *glasnost* in the hopes of preserving the Soviet Union. The Kirovabad pogroms in November 1988 were the spectacular and unexpected culmination of a longer process of nationalization that reinforced Azerbaijanis’ sense of entitlement to their republic in which Armenians were now seen as unwelcome foreign bodies.

Theorizing Pogroms

As this thesis tackles established theories of ethnic conflict, it also seeks to elucidate the major form of violence witnessed in Kirovabad: pogroms. A multidimensional, comparative analysis of pogroms is beyond the scope of this study, but a working definition is necessary for the term to have any analytical utility. In his landmark work *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (2001), which encapsulates many of the features of the Kirovabad pogroms, Donald L. Horowitz adopts a rather narrow understanding of a pogrom as a “massacre of helpless people” and by extension a “subcategory of the ethnic riot.”³⁰ This definition, while not entirely incorrect, stresses the lethal nature of pogroms while ignoring the wider spectrum of actions—including intimidating threats, blatant discrimination, the destruction and theft of property, beatings, and rape—that precede or accompany killing. Pogroms are not synonymous with outright murder, even though death is

²⁸ Rogers Brubaker, “Nationhood and the national question in the Soviet Union and its successors states: an institutional account,” in *Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 30.

²⁹ Kaiser, “The Ethnocultural Transformation of Soviet Society: Russification versus Indigenization,” in *The Geography of Nationalism*, 323.

³⁰ Donald L. Horowitz, “Say It with Murder,” in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2001), 20. Despite his preference for the term “riot,” Horowitz’s magisterial study analyzes forms of violence that other scholars might refer to as pogroms.

commonplace. Far more compelling is the more expansive explanation of pogroms as “the destructive energies of violent mobs vented against people seen as alien.”³¹ Building on this idea, this essay argues for a more inclusive conception of pogroms that takes killing as a component, albeit a central one, of a much larger cluster of practices and behavioral patterns that characterize crowd violence. Given the lack of scholarly consensus on definitions and the blurred boundaries between pogroms, riots, attacks, strikes, and assaults, this paper uses these terms interchangeably to describe a specific type of phenomenon: mass, relatively unorganized (though not inherently chaotic) physical violence perpetrated against members of a perceived out-group.

Historically, pogroms were neither random, isolated events, nor were they strikes orchestrated well in advance. They were generally the result of cumulative pressures and unforeseen developments that emerged in specific contexts. As other scholars have shown, pogroms occurred at critical junctures that enabled violence, such as public demonstrations, processions, and religious holidays, where crowds gathered but became increasingly belligerent as a result of “precipitating events” and rumors that justified action against a given target group.³² Though often exaggerated, these prior episodes reinforced the notion among future pogromists that an out-group represented a dire threat lurking in their midst. In a thought-provoking case study, Edward H. Judge explains how a murder committed during Passover in 1903 in Kishinev fueled wild rumors among Christians of a malicious Jewish plot that reinforced existing prejudices and catalyzed deadly pogroms.³³ A similar dynamic was present in Kirovabad as well. The fear that Armenians were attempting to seize the coveted region of Nagorno Karabakh—

³¹ Caroline Humphrey, “Odessa: Pogroms in a Cosmopolitan City,” in *Post-Cosmopolitan Cities: Explorations of Urban Coexistence* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012/14), 17.

³² Horowitz, “The Occasions for Violence,” in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, 71, 268; Humphrey, “Odessa: Pogroms in a Cosmopolitan City,” 19, 23-24, 27, 34-35.

³³ Edward H. Judge, “The Causes and Legacy of the Easter Riots,” in *Easter in Kishinev: Anatomy of a Pogrom* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1992), 137.

portrayed as an integral part of Azerbaijanis' ancestral homeland—heightened anxieties in the city, and when it was announced that an Azerbaijani man would be sentenced to death for his role in the Sumgait massacres in February 1988, angry protests morphed into attacks on Armenian residents. Latent tensions certainly existed, and they grew over the course of 1988, but they required sparks to induce physical aggression against Armenians. Understanding Kirovabad's sudden implosion thus entails retracing the successive stages and contingencies that led to the eruption of violence on November 21, 1988.

Problems and Approaches to Textual Sources

Writing a thesis about an ongoing conflict presents certain difficulties when it comes to acquiring primary sources. Since the sensitive nature of the subject matter precluded archival research in Azerbaijan, this study will rely on articles published in local, regional, and all-union periodicals obtained at three locations: (1) the editorial office of the Russian-language newspaper *Novosti Giandzhi* in Ganja; (2) the Akhundov National Library in Baku; and (3) the Open Society Archives (OSA) in Budapest. Newspapers are a useful (and plentiful) but insufficient means of understanding life on the ground in Kirovabad. Weaving newspaper articles together with oral history interviews (see next section), I aim to explore the discrepancies between the images of Soviet society portrayed on the printed page and the lived experiences of Kirovabadians. Periodicals provide an overview of the events and the processes structuring residents' lives, but they reveal little about popular perceptions and interactions outside the official venues—such as the factory, the public square, the parade, and the theater—featured in daily columns. They provide a continuously optimistic depiction of Kirovabad, but they give few intimate details, even during the city's darkest hours.

Accordingly, there are obvious limitations to working with Soviet periodicals that often served as vessels of state ideology. In Azerbaijan, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the printed press was not simply a source of information but a powerful tool for building, legitimizing, and projecting a favorable image of socialism. Utopian visions of a glorious present and an even more radiant future were staple features of Soviet periodicals that routinely embellished and distorted reality. Reading through dozens of issues of three periodicals printed in Kirovabad, one detects a remarkable continuity in style and themes, including the myth of the indestructible “friendship of peoples,” throughout the Soviet period. Many of the glowing articles featured in subsequent chapters attest to the presence of what Jeffrey Brooks terms a “single overarching discourse” that permeated Soviet newspapers even in the post-Stalinist era.³⁴ While hailing the achievements of Soviet citizens and the wisdom of their leaders, these newspapers rarely reported on sensitive social issues such as crime or national tensions that contradicted the narrative of a society in a state of progressive transformation.

Yet, instead of dismissing these newspapers as hollow propaganda concealing the truth beneath layers of meaningless trivia and recycled slogans, this thesis contends that periodicals serve as valuable source material for several reasons. They are, first and foremost, a daily record outlining the contours of Soviet life. Providing insights into local politics and culture, they detail government decrees, speeches, visits of Soviet and foreign dignitaries, holidays, festivals, literature, and musical and theater performances that punctuated citizens’ humdrum routines. These public spectacles and collective celebrations allow one to understand how a sense of community was constructed at the ground level. Furthermore, the “performative” character of newspapers highlights the rhetorical strategies used to reinforce Soviet power, while indirectly

³⁴ Jeffrey Brooks, “Socialist Realism in Pravda: Read All about It!” *Slavic Review* 53.4 (Winter 1994): 975.

identifying potential areas of concern to state authorities with the use of ambiguous language.³⁵ A close reading also reveals a shift toward national themes in the local Azerbaijani press that paralleled a process of indigenization of Soviet institutions in Azerbaijan in the Brezhnev years (1964-82). In other words, Soviet newspapers are awash with dull and misleading reportage, but they also tell a larger story if one reads carefully.

As for selection, articles regarding cultural life, interethnic relations, the “friendship of peoples,” and violence constitute the bulk of the newspaper sources examined in the following chapters. This somewhat crude filter was an expedient solution when faced with the task of sifting through thousands of pages in a matter of days while conducting research in Azerbaijan. As the heir to the Soviet-era newspaper *Kirovabadskii Rabochii* (*Kirovabad Worker*), the office of *Novosti Giandzhi* has preserved hard copies of its predecessor’s publications in bound volumes. Unfortunately, however, these volumes were arranged in a haphazard manner with issues from key years such as 1988 missing, thus making it exceedingly difficult to collect articles systematically. What appears in this thesis is but a sampling of the larger collection, but one chosen based on context and relevance. Additional local newspapers published in the Azerbaijani language—*Kirovabad Bolşeviqi* (*Kirovabad Bolshevik*) and *Kirovabad Kommunisti* (*Kirovabad Communist*)—from the Akhundov State Library in Baku serve as supplementary periodicals that fill in important gaps, especially during the fateful days of late November 1988.

In addition to an extensive collection of all-union periodicals such as *Pravda* and regional newspapers such as *Bakinskii Rabochii* (*Baku Worker*), the OSA holdings offer a more diverse array of source material related to the late-Soviet Caucasus, including Radio Liberty (RL) reports, open letters, and *samizdat* texts. These documents are especially valuable because they

³⁵ For an analysis of performance in Soviet periodicals in the age of Stalin, see Idem, “The Performance Begins,” in *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 54-82.

reveal the observations of foreign commentators and the counter-discourse of petitions and complaints directed toward or even against Moscow regarding turmoil in Azerbaijan. In many cases, Radio Liberty monitoring demystifies events referred to only obliquely in the Soviet press. Open letters and *samizdat* essays (often addressed to Gorbachev himself) produced in 1988 reflect the sentiments of Armenians outraged by the fate of their co-nationals in Azerbaijan at a time when Soviet newspapers adhered clumsily to the “friendship of peoples” narrative. They illustrate how memories of the genocide of 1915 quickly resurfaced under *glasnost*’ and mobilized Armenians to make demands vis-à-vis the Soviet center. Questions concerning the authorship, publication, and distribution of *samizdat* are difficult to answer given the lack of data, but these publications provide a fascinating window on unofficial texts that circulated underneath the mainstream media discourse.

In evaluating these diverse documents, I follow Ann Laura Stoler’s approach to archival sources, a strategy that urges historians not to problematize texts by always reading between the lines, but to “explore the grain with care and read along it first.”³⁶ In other words, rather than debate whether a given document is truthful or deceptive, my analysis seeks to understand these texts on their own terms while reflecting on the assumptions, concerns, and messages embedded within them. Using Natalie Zemon Davis’s concept of “fiction in the archives,” my interpretation also pays close attention to the “crafting of a narrative”—to the discursive strategies of power and self-fashioning that state newspapers, for example, used to condemn violence as anti-Soviet, or that Armenian petitioners deployed to convince Mikhail Gorbachev that they were confronting

³⁶ Although Stoler focuses on Dutch archives and what they reveal about the colonial experience in Indonesia, her insights are relevant for all historians working with sources they might be inclined to take for granted. See Ann Laura Stoler, “The Pulse of the Archive,” in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 50.

a second genocide.³⁷ How Soviet journalists and “dissident” authors formulated their arguments is in many respects just as revealing as the substance of their claims.

Aside from newspaper and archival sources, two other publications are worthy of mention at the outset. Given the tendentious nature of historical writing in Armenia and Azerbaijan, this thesis, regrettably, avoids engaging seriously with local scholarship. The partisan historiographies that dominate the academy in Armenia and Azerbaijan are largely unreliable sources for historians trying to navigate through the thicket of nationalist polemics. However, one noteworthy exception of particular importance for the present study is the collaborative work of an Armenian ethnographer and a former Armenian resident of Kirovabad, entitled *The Self-Defense of the Armenians of Kirovabad through the Eyes of Witnesses, 1988-89* (2014). This recent publication (in Russian) is the first compilation of memoirs, eyewitness reports, and documentary evidence that chronicles the anti-Armenian riots in Kirovabad. Using this source to discuss the “Armenian side of the story” will compensate to a great extent for the complete silence surrounding this issue in Ganja today. In addition to extensive commentary from the main author, Grigorii Oganezov, the text includes a number of eyewitness testimonies, audio transcripts, letters, photographs, a map, and various supplementary documents that help shed greater light on the convulsions that expelled Armenians from Kirovabad. The musings of the author occasionally detract from the larger argument, but the monograph is far from a work of propaganda that seeks to malign Azerbaijanis. While this thesis draws extensively on Oganezov’s chronicle, it compares and corroborates his account with oral history interviews conducted in Yerevan in September 2014, as well as with Radio Liberty monitoring reports that address mounting tensions in Kirovabad and the surrounding region in the late 1980s.

³⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis, “Introduction,” in *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 3.

Meanwhile, the final chapter delves into the most ubiquitous historical text in Azerbaijan: a high-school history textbook. Despite their provocative content, educational books in Azerbaijan provide telling insights into the construction of ethnocentric outlooks on the past. In order to illustrate larger historiographical trends in Azerbaijan since independence, the final chapter will analyze radical revisionist narratives in *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana (History of Azerbaijan)*, vol. 11, covering the period from the end of the First World War to the present. To be sure, a single textbook cannot provide a comprehensive overview of the voluminous literature that has emerged over the past two decades, but it does contain many of the tropes that pervade propagandistic historical works portraying Armenians as implacable foes. Inspired by Maria Todorova's seminal work *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), which convincingly debunked nationalist myths about Ottoman tyranny and the enslavement of Christian Slavs in southeastern Europe, this section deconstructs Azerbaijani historical narratives in order to illustrate how the contemporary politics of history in the South Caucasus have distorted Azerbaijan's past almost beyond recognition.

Voices from Kirovabad: Evaluating Testimonies, Interpreting Silence

In addition to periodicals and other archival sources, personal testimonies from over a dozen oral history interviews conducted in Tbilisi, Ganja, Baku, and Yerevan in August and September 2014 feature prominently in the following chapters. These testimonies serve as an important window on Armenian and Azerbaijani residents' lived experiences and worldviews—an intimate, “hidden” dimension of history entirely missing from newspapers and official records. The initial selection criteria were open-ended—the primary goal was to speak with “ordinary citizens” of Kirovabad—and ultimately a wide range of individuals shared their memories, from former engineers, schoolteachers, nurses, and accountants to pensioners,

intellectuals, and young professionals.³⁸ Given the difficulty of organizing interviews from afar, I relied on a network of contacts established during a previous sojourn in Azerbaijan in 2012-2013 to arrange meetings with potential respondents upon arrival. In many cases, especially in Armenia, local acquaintances introduced me to their friends and family members who agreed to participate in interviews that often were incredibly rich in detail. Unfortunately, many Azerbaijani respondents appeared reluctant to comment openly about Armenians given the prevailing silence surrounding their expulsion and the possible consequences for speaking to a foreign researcher about such a sensitive topic. Though this project endeavors to shed light on memories from both sides of the conflict divide, there is an imbalance in perspectives that is necessarily biased toward Armenians who were more forthcoming about life in Kirovabad and their flight in 1988-89. However, the preponderance of Armenian voices does not imply a pro-Armenian stance or a tacit endorsement of their narratives. No ulterior motive lurks behind this work, and nowhere does this thesis apportion blame or agitate for the recognition of suffering or crimes on either side. If anything, it rejects black-and-white categories of perpetrators and victims and bypasses senseless debates over which nation endured greater hardship.

Before discussing my interview “tactics,” a few words in defense of oral history that address its drawbacks and benefits are necessary. Working with oral testimonies clearly presents a number of obstacles in terms of reliability and interpretation. As with written sources, the veracity of relatively spontaneous verbal accounts requires interrogation and corroboration given that uncertainties and distortions are commonplace. Even experienced practitioners of oral history acknowledge its many pitfalls, including: the selective and fragmentary nature of personal memory; the blurring of personal and public memories; the temporal distance between a

³⁸ NB: I conducted interviews with three respondents who never lived in Kirovabad but whose reflections on Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in the Soviet period were valuable nonetheless.

historical period or event and contemporary reflections; factual inaccuracies; and the desire to portray oneself in a positive light.³⁹ The passage of time naturally affects a respondent's ability to recall particular events, moments, or conversations with precision, especially when those episodes are buried beneath or intertwined with other memories. One might add that the considerable gap between collecting interviews and writing about them calls into question the researcher's own ability to remember clearly. These issues, among others, render oral history a highly dubious exercise in the eyes of some historians committed to document-based research.

What those dismissive of oral history fail to realize, however, is that textual sources also contain incomplete records, later reflections, and fabrications. Documents are not simply printed facts—they demand just as much careful scrutiny as oral testimonies and are arguably more difficult to interpret given the inaccessibility of the narrator. Besides providing valuable information, the style and structure of respondents' narratives—the tone, speech patterns, storytelling techniques, anecdotes, and tangents—create additional layers of meaning, which allows one to approach the “speaker's subjectivity” that is so elusive for written sources.⁴⁰ Through an informant's account of the past one can look beyond historical events to the realm of perceptions and self-reflection, and even when respondents avoid addressing certain issues they often reveal something. Selective remembrance and silence are not necessarily disadvantages of oral history but potentially revelatory omissions, for “the most precious information may lie in what the informants *hide*, and in the fact that they *do* hide it, rather than in what they tell.”⁴¹

³⁹ For a discussion regarding the issue of “incorporated memories” in the oral testimonies of former Gulag prisoners, see Jehanne M. Gheith and Katherine R. Jolluck, “Introduction,” in *Gulag Voices: Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and Exile* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 8-9.

⁴⁰ Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different?,” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

What is left unsaid, in other words, often speaks volumes about the interviewee's rhetorical strategies and position vis-à-vis the subject(s) under consideration.

The “flaws” in Armenian and Azerbaijani testimonies presented in the following chapters—their contradictions, inconsistencies, and gaps—do not disqualify them as valuable sources. Indeed, in the absence of other extant documents, they are virtually the only means at the historian's disposal to uncover hidden histories below the surface. Their contribution is underappreciated in large part because the content is considered suspect by default. However, as Jan T. Gross aptly remarked regarding traditional approaches to Holocaust survivors' testimonies that advocate “cautious skepticism toward any testimony *until an independent confirmation of its content has been found*,” historians have little to lose and much to gain by treating eyewitness testimonies as credible evidence.⁴² This observation is especially true when it comes to traumatic episodes in the past. Tragic events such as pogroms that are “seared into the witnesses' consciousness, are more stable than everyday memories and retrievable” long after violence subsides, and, as a result, they “add factual data to the historical record.”⁴³ Of course, taking respondents “at their word” does not mean that one should accept testimonies at face value, but it does suggest that their testimonies offer much more than disjointed memories.

As for the structure and content of the interviews, guiding questions provided a general outline for discussion, but after giving their informed consent respondents had complete freedom to express their thoughts and end the interview at any time. The overall goal was to allow respondents to “speak extemporaneously about their lives and experiences,” while focusing the conversation on the connections, friendships, and shared rituals between Armenians and

⁴² Jan T. Gross, “New Approaches to Sources,” in *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 140.

⁴³ Jeffrey Veidlinger, “Conclusion,” in *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 281.

Azerbaijanis, as well as the differences and tensions that divided them during the late Soviet period.⁴⁴ This framework proved effective in eliciting detailed responses and concrete examples from some interviewees, while for others this open-ended approach was less fruitful. The nature of the questions—at times too imprecise or formulaic—often generated predictable results that called for further explanation. In retrospect, many inquiries focused too explicitly on Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, nationality, and conflict, but other questions probed into respondents' youth, social circles, professions, daily activities, as well as their attitudes toward the Soviet state in order to obtain a wider picture. Interviews were generally planned in advance, though there were also impromptu meetings for which prior preparation was not possible. Some interview locations, such as a noisy outdoor café in downtown Yerevan, were far from ideal settings, but extended, follow-up interviews allowed several interviewees to reflect on their experiences in greater detail. Most interviews took place in the respondents' homes or workplaces and were conducted in Russian, or a mixture of Russian, Azerbaijani, and English, with the occasional assistance of family members who served as interlocutors. Their presence undoubtedly eased respondents' anxieties and facilitated conversations that were at times uncomfortable and painful. In accordance with scholarly practices regarding anonymity, this thesis uses pseudonyms and only general biographical details in order to conceal respondents' identities.

Doing research both inside and outside the former conflict zone meant that the process of conducting interviews and assessing outcomes was vastly different in both countries. In Azerbaijan, the presence of a voice recorder altered the dynamic of the interviews considerably. In several cases, respondents explicitly requested not to have their testimonies recorded, while others who agreed to record their voices tended to adopt an official tone, as if assuming the role of spokesperson for the Azerbaijani nation. To some extent, their seemingly scripted responses

⁴⁴ Veidlinger, "Introduction," in *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, xx.

reflect the internalization of state discourse reproduced in political speeches and mass media on a daily basis. Yet one should be careful not to attribute such statements to government brainwashing; instead, they point toward the fusion of official narratives with personal memories of past trauma. Feelings of bitterness as well as compassion for Armenians existed together. On an individual level, some Azerbaijani respondents distinguished between “good” local Armenians and their less respectable brethren across the border. They often recalled particular Armenian friends with fondness and spoke of warm relations before the conflict, but Armenians as a nation almost always emerged as the aggressor in their reminiscences. This fixation on Armenians as the sole perpetrators perhaps explains why many respondents—when faced with the question of what happened to Kirovabad’s Armenian community—denied that Azerbaijanis had mistreated Armenians. Whether Azerbaijani interviewees intentionally chose to omit these details in their recollections (perhaps not wishing to contradict entrenched narratives of Azerbaijani victimhood or to revisit an unpleasant period), or simply were not aware that pogroms occurred remains unclear, but the fact that rioting was left unaddressed signals a pattern of selective remembrance in which the acknowledgement of Armenian suffering is taboo. What is striking, however, is the profound disconnect between Azerbaijani tales of Armenians’ peaceful departure from Kirovabad and Armenians’ detailed accounts of persecution.

In contrast to Azerbaijani interviewees, all Armenian respondents agreed to record their testimonies, and many provided invaluable details about daily life prior to 1988 as well as a thorough reconstruction of the series of events that caused them to relocate to Armenia. Their accounts were remarkably nuanced in comparison to Azerbaijanis’ testimonies, which at times felt rehearsed or insincere. Of course, the consequences for Armenian respondents in speaking about the recent past are minimal, for they have little to lose by divulging their stories given their

de facto victim status in Armenian society. Some interviewees' emotional responses revealed a tendency to reproduce essentialist views of "Turks" as uncivilized and brutal, but other respondents, including those who actively participated in the self-defense of Armenian neighborhoods, did not regard Azerbaijanis as bestial "others." One particular interviewee, who suddenly burst out singing in impeccable Azerbaijani over dinner in a crowded restaurant in Yerevan, seemed to embody the ties that still bind Armenians and Azerbaijanis together despite their present estrangement. In the end, the handful of testimonies presented here does not purport to be a representative sample that captures the full complexity of Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in Kirovabad, but it does aim to illuminate the ways in which residents of Kirovabad experienced and continue to remember their life together in the city.

2. VOICES FROM KIROVABAD: EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS & DISJUNCTURES IN THE CITY (1956-1988)

Setting the Stage

Before chronicling a multiethnic city's demise, one must investigate how pluralism lasted for so long. How did residents of Kirovabad negotiate their place in the city? What were the situations and factors that pulled them closer to each other and pushed them away? This chapter seeks to illuminate the ways in which Armenians and Azerbaijanis, in the words of Shimon Redlich, lived "together and apart" simultaneously.⁴⁵ Writing a social history that emphasizes only harmonious coexistence or perpetual antagonism does not capture the complexity of urban life that clearly lies somewhere in between these poles. To be sure, Kirovabad was neither the bulwark of Soviet internationalism glorified in local newspapers, nor a ticking time bomb of ethnic discord. Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived lives of intimacy and distance. They spoke each other's languages, worked at the same factories, spent leisure time together, celebrated weddings, and mourned side by side at funerals, but in many cases they lived in separate districts, attended their own schools, and harbored misgivings about each other that lurked beneath the surface. Nationality, it seems, was at times of great importance and at times inconsequential. While Soviet ideology and education inculcated respect for and celebrated national differences, Kirovabadians also shared a sense of belonging to a supranational community of Soviet citizens.⁴⁶ The Soviet leadership "encouraged, imposed and enforced" interactions between nationalities in order to defuse potential conflicts and build socialism—and

⁴⁵ Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians, 1919-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

⁴⁶ Caroline Humphrey, "Cosmopolitanism and *kosmopolitizm* in the political life of Soviet citizens," *Focaal—European Journal of Anthropology* 44 (2004): 146.

many Kirovabadians internalized these practices in their daily lives—but it also institutionalized nationality through mechanisms that ultimately undermined its authority.⁴⁷ Analyzing the ways in which Kirovabadians interacted, what role nationality played in their everyday encounters (and how it changed over time), and how state policies impinged on their lives are the goals of this chapter.

To explore the intersection between “everyday ethnicity” and Soviet nationalities policies, I draw extensively on the testimonies of current and former residents of Kirovabad. Of course, relying on the fragmented memories of individuals who have endured great hardship, trauma, and years of state propaganda presents a number of interpretive challenges. In analyzing the testimonies of interviewees now distant from the events they describe, one must bear in mind that “people tend to interpret certain periods in the past in view of subsequent events.”⁴⁸ Upon closer investigation, the significance of the developments, policies, and personalities featured in respondents’ stories appear to be observations formed in retrospect. With hindsight, some respondents have constructed intricate plot lines in which disparate episodes are stitched together to form a coherent narrative culminating in pogroms, depopulation, and war. The historian’s task is not to expose this linear progression as false, but to deconstruct this teleology and provide a more nuanced picture of Kirovabad prior to 1988. Rather than assume that the pogroms were the inevitable result of decades of simmering tensions, the following pages endeavor to understand life in Kirovabad “as it actually was during its ‘normal’ times as well as during the time of turmoil, hate, suffering, and loss.”⁴⁹

The temporal framework for this chapter is at once bounded and open-ended. Interviewees’ testimonies did not adhere to a strictly chronological format, and many

⁴⁷ Caroline Humphrey and Vera Skvirskaja, “Introduction,” in *Post-Cosmopolitan Cities*, 2.

⁴⁸ Redlich, “Concluding Remarks,” in *Together and Apart in Brzezany*, 163.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

respondents were unable to recall exact dates or discuss particular topics with certainty, thus making it difficult to pinpoint precisely when a given event or conversation occurred. Accordingly, I have chosen to organize the content of the interviews thematically. Although the chapter focuses on aspects of everyday life and political changes during the last three decades of Soviet rule in Azerbaijan—a period often referred to as the era of “late socialism” when many of my respondents came of age—the first section dwells briefly on the legacies of the late imperial and early Soviet periods in order to contextualize the contested memories and nationalist polemics that later emerged. To understand the long-term consequences of Soviet nationalities policies initiated in the 1920s, as well as how memories of past atrocities were preserved and reactivated at critical moments in subsequent decades, one must revisit these episodes in the early twentieth century and trace their trajectory through the post-Stalinist era. Thus, this chapter joins a growing corpus of literature that seeks to understand “late socialism” as much more than a period of economic and political malaise, while opening up a new dimension of this field of research that examines the twists and turns of politics and social interactions in a multiethnic urban space.⁵⁰

The Making of Kirovabad: Imperial Legacies and Soviet Transformations

Contrary to the exclusivist claims of nationalist historians, Ganja, or Elizavetpol’ as it was known after its incorporation into the Russian Empire in 1804, was a multiethnic and multi-confessional urban center. According to census data from 1892, Elizavetpol’s population was estimated at 25,758 inhabitants consisting primarily of “Tatar-Muslims” (13,392) and Armenians (10,524) who resided in this bustling provincial town with thirteen mosques, two Russian

⁵⁰ A number of recent works have attempted to move beyond the topos of stagnation in the Brezhnev era, including: Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, eds., *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964-1985* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2013); Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, eds., *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); and Polly Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953-70* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

Orthodox churches, six Armenian-Gregorian churches, seven caravanserais, ten educational institutions, and seven bathhouses.⁵¹ During the nineteenth century pluralism survived intact in Elizavetpol' with no major violence reported. Not until the turbulent events of the 1905 Revolution did Transcaucasia witness large-scale conflict between "Tatars" and Armenians. Though horrific, the bloodshed was far from an outburst of pent-up ancient hatreds. Arguing against essentialist theories of ethnic violence, revisionist scholars have begun to draw attention to the ways in which periods of armed conflict in the late tsarist period nurtured the growth of nationalism.⁵² According to Leslie Sargent, the so-called "Armeno-Tatar War" of 1905-06—a yearlong series of clashes across Transcaucasia (including Elizavetpol') that cost somewhere between 3,000 to 10,000 lives—was a critical historical juncture when "the cycles of violence instead promoted a hardening of boundaries between Armenians and Azeris as 'ethnic' groups."⁵³ Similarly, Tadeusz Swietochowski maintains that violent confrontation with Armenians "generated for the first time a united action for a cause transcending local or sectarian loyalties" that helped to shape the contours of nascent Azerbaijani nationhood.⁵⁴ To be sure, a sense of belonging to an Azerbaijani nation would not coalesce until the Soviet period, but the turmoil of 1905-06 drove Armenians and "Tatars" further apart than ever before.⁵⁵

⁵¹ K.K. Arseniev, *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* [*Encyclopedic Dictionary*], vol. 11 (St. Petersburg, 1894), s.v. "Elizavetpol'."

⁵² Eric Lohr argues along these lines to describe the contingent rise of nationalism in the context of mass mobilization and total war in the western borderlands during the First World War. See Lohr, "War Nationalism," in *The Empire and Nationalism at War*, eds. Eric Lohr, Vera Tolz, and Alexander Semyonov (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2014), 91-107.

⁵³ Leslie Sargent, "The 'Armeno-Tatar War' in the South Caucasus, 1905-1906: Multiple Causes, Interpreted Meanings," *Ab Imperio* 4 (2010): 147, 144.

⁵⁴ Tadeusz Swietochowski, "National Consciousness and Political Orientations in Azerbaijan, 1905-1920," in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 215.

⁵⁵ Several Armenian respondents noted that after the violence of 1905, Armenians in Elizavetpol' began to resettle on the right bank of the Ganjachai River that would become the future Armenian quarter. Mariam, interview with author, Tbilisi, August 29, 2014; Haik and Evgenii, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014.

Subsequent clashes in Transcaucasia were not simply eruptions of ethnic enmity, but rather the unintended outcomes of imperial collapse and bitter contestation among various political factions in Baku. Indeed, 1917 marked the beginning of a new phase of revolutionary upheaval in which pernicious rumors and conspiracy theories circulated wildly, creating an “atmosphere of mutual mistrust and apprehension” conducive to further violence.⁵⁶ Rumors of a Muslim uprising at the behest of the “Savage Division” galvanized Bolshevik and Dashnak forces to launch strikes throughout Baku during the so-called “March Events,” or “March Days” (March 29 – April 2, 1918)—a spate of massacres in Baku that claimed the lives of some 12,000 Muslims and installed a Bolshevik government known as the Baku Commune that lasted for a mere four months before disintegrating.⁵⁷ To the west, a regional conflagration was unfolding as the Ottoman military stood poised to recover lost territories annexed by the now defunct Russian Empire. The establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) on May 28, 1918 in Ganja (formerly Elizavetpol’) was not the fulfillment of a nationalist agenda, but the result of a power vacuum in Transcaucasia caused by the collapse of the Transcaucasian Federation and the encroachment of Ottoman forces, which supported the ADR and eventually recaptured Baku.⁵⁸ As the Ottoman commander Nuri Pasha’s army overwhelmed the city’s defenders on September 15, Azerbaijani units retaliated against the local population for atrocities committed during the

⁵⁶ Michael G. Smith, “Anatomy of a Rumour: Murder Scandal, the Musavat Party and Narratives of the Russian Revolution in Baku, 1917-20,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 36.2 (2001): 225.

⁵⁷ Idem, “Power and Violence in the Russian Revolution: The March Events and Baku Commune of 1918,” *Russian History* 41 (2014): 204-06. The definitive work on the Baku Commune remains Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Baku Commune, 1917-1918: Class and Nationality in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). “Dashnak” denotes a member of the Armenian revolutionary party *Dashnaktsutun* formed in Tiflis in 1890.

⁵⁸ The Transcaucasian Federation was a tripartite government formed in Tbilisi on April 22, 1918 that consisted of three ethno-political parties: Georgian Mensheviks, Armenian Dashnaks, and Azerbaijani Musavatists. It lasted for just one month before Georgian Mensheviks declared independence on May 26, 1918 with the support of the German Empire.

“March Events,” killing upwards of 9,000 Armenians.⁵⁹ Although the Soviet myth of the valiant twenty-six Baku Commissars—emblems of revolutionary struggle and internationalism that far outlived the Commune—ultimately prevailed in official memory, many Armenians and Azerbaijanis clung to a sense of victimhood that would resurface in powerful ways when mass violence broke out again in 1988.

After less than two years of independence, the ADR’s bloodless capitulation to the Bolsheviks in Baku on April 28, 1920 did not usher in an era of oppressive centralization and national persecution. Although the Red Army faced tenacious resistance across Azerbaijan, particularly in Ganja where a major armed uprising occurred in May-June 1920, Bolshevik leaders generally adopted a cautious approach to Turkic Muslims as with other non-Russian populations inhabiting the former imperial borderlands.⁶⁰ Eager to distance itself from the “Great Russian chauvinism” associated with the late Romanov Empire, the Soviet leadership under Lenin’s guidance endorsed national languages, cultures, cadres, and territories in order to build a multinational, socialist state.⁶¹ This campaign of *korenizatsiia* (“indigenization” or “nativization”) during the 1920s was anathema to many hard-line Bolsheviks who rejected such concessions to national interests, but ultimately Lenin and his Commissar of Nationalities, Stalin, concurred that “‘national engineering’ would enable the Bolsheviks to consolidate their rule and influence through the medium of national loyalties.”⁶² In Azerbaijan, the Bolsheviks managed to endow the Turkic Muslims of eastern Transcaucasia with the trappings of nationhood to advance the larger cause of building socialism, adhering to the vague formula “national in form, socialist

⁵⁹ Michael A. Reynolds, “Racing against time,” *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 233-35.

⁶⁰ For a brief description of the Ganja uprising, see Audrey L. Altstadt, “The Sovietization of Azerbaijan,” in *The Azerbaijani Turks: Power and Identity under Russian Rule* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 110-11.

⁶¹ The definitive study of Soviet nationality policies remains Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁶² Jeremy Smith, “Conclusion,” in *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999), 240.

in content.” Meanwhile, containing interethnic hostility required delicate solutions that would facilitate the incorporation of Transcaucasia into the emerging Soviet state. Faced with ongoing, armed conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, especially over the disputed territory of Nagorno Karabakh, the Bolsheviks opted for a compromise by placing the region within Soviet Azerbaijan while granting it considerable autonomy as a majority-Armenian province in 1921.⁶³ In Transcaucasia, then, a fragile leadership was struggling to obtain legitimacy on the ground, investing enormous resources to quell conflict and reshape everyday life at the local level. But how did this process actually unfold in urban spaces?

Turning the former national capital Ganja into a socialist city entailed symbolic reconfigurations of space that played a “social-transformative role” in assimilating residents into Soviet society.⁶⁴ Aside from the opening of factories and schools responsible for forging new Soviet men and women, changes in nomenclature signaled an important break with the city’s imperial past and provided founding myths about the glorious “sovietization” of Azerbaijan. Most importantly, in 1935, Ganja was renamed Kirovabad in honor of Sergei Kirov, a prominent Soviet leader and member of the Bolshevik *Kavbiuro* (Caucasus Bureau) assassinated under mysterious circumstances in Leningrad the year before. Lionized in the local press, he became a martyr figure remembered as the one who “fought consistently and uncompromisingly for the realization of Leninist-Stalinist nationality policy, for the brotherhood of peoples.”⁶⁵ Other legendary Bolsheviks were immortalized in the built environment. At some point, the local

⁶³ For a recent study that challenges conventional wisdom about Soviet “divide and rule” strategies in the Caucasus, see Arsène Saparov, “Why Autonomy? The Making of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region 1918-1925,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64.2 (March 2012): 281-323.

⁶⁴ David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, “Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc,” in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, eds. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002), 11.

⁶⁵ “Пламенный борец за дело коммунизма” [Ardent Fighter for the Cause of Communism], *Кировабадский Рабочий* [Kirovabad Worker], December 1, 1949, 1. “...он последовательно и непримиримо боролся за осуществление ленинско-сталинской национальной политики, за братство народов.”

textile plant was named after Sergo Ordzhonikidze—Kirov’s Georgian comrade in the *Kavbiuro* who oversaw the incorporation of Transcaucasia into the Soviet Union—and streets adopted the names of fallen Baku Commissars who had entered the Bolshevik pantheon despite their checkered past. Meanwhile, the rhythm of daily life was punctuated by festive occasions such as anniversaries of the October Revolution that drew large crowds onto public squares to mark their city’s evolution under Soviet rule. From the center of an anti-Bolshevik insurrection to the second most important manufacturing hub in Azerbaijan, Kirovabad appeared to be a success story of Soviet economic and social engineering.

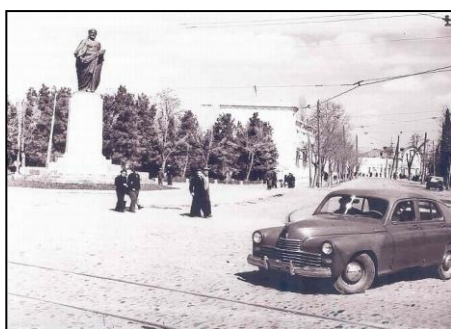


Fig. 4: Statue of Nizami (undated)

Source: Online photo gallery of the newspaper *Novosti Gandzhi* (http://www.novostigyandji.com/?page_id=25)



Fig. 5: Kirovabad central square and government building (undated)

Source: Online photo gallery of the newspaper *Novosti Gandzhi* (http://www.novostigyandji.com/?page_id=25)

Although envisioned first and foremost as an industrial center, Kirovabad also embraced different national languages and cultures, as evidenced by the existence of local Azerbaijani and Armenian schools and theaters.⁶⁶ The spirit of internationalism pervaded mass public spectacles such as the 800th birthday jubilee of the medieval Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi in September 1947, touted not as a celebration of Azerbaijani identity but as a “festival of the whole

⁶⁶ “Kirovabad devlät ermäni teatrosunda” [In the Kirovabad State Armenian Theater], *Kirovabad Bolşeviqi* [Kirovabad Bolshevik], February 9, 1937, 4; A. S. Zakharov, “Xalq maarifimiz inkişaf yollarında” [Our People’s Education on the Roads of Development], *Кировабад Коммунисти* [Kirovabad Communist], November 7, 1959, 3; “Teatrımız Tbilisidə” [Our Theater in Tbilisi], *Кировабад Коммунисти* [Kirovabad Communist], June 30, 1962, 4.

multinational family of peoples of our socialist Fatherland.”⁶⁷ Inklings of interethnic tension were nowhere in sight. The local press downplayed any lingering traces of ethnic enmity by proclaiming that “Kirovabad is a city of brotherhood and friendship. Here Russians and Ukrainians, Armenians and Georgians, Uzbeks and Kazakhs live alongside Azerbaijanis like one united family.”⁶⁸ In theory, the advent of Soviet power had eliminated ethnic strife and other harmful legacies of tsarist Russia, uniting all nationalities under one banner. A local Armenian attributed the violence of the late imperial period to the political machinations of nationalist parties, to the “past Dashnak and Mūsavat instigations, the policy of national hostility, of racial discrimination long since eradicated” in Soviet Kirovabad.⁶⁹ Since Kirovabadians had overcome the adverse effects of bourgeois nationalism, so the official discourse went, they now strove to build socialism as an indivisible proletariat. The “friendship of peoples” extended across republican borders as well. Kirovabad, along with its “brother” cities Leninakan (Armenia) and Kutaisi (Georgia), participated in friendly competitions to boost industrial output and strengthen mutual ties between the three republics.⁷⁰ Hailed as a worker’s paradise that welcomed all citizens irrespective of nationality, Kirovabad thus stood as a beacon of Soviet progress in the Caucasus.

Stories of Friendship and Intimacy

To what extent were these glowing depictions of brotherhood and unity actually true? Without exception, interviewees recalled interethnic relations in the late Soviet era with

⁶⁷ “Певец любви, свободы и прогресса” [Bard of Love, Freedom, and Progress], *Кировабадский Рабочий* [Kirovabad Worker], September 25, 1947, 1. “... праздник всей многонациональной семьи народов нашего социалистического Отечества.”

⁶⁸ “Xalqların qardaşlığı var olsun!” [Long Live the Brotherhood of Peoples!], *Кировабад Коммунисти* [Kirovabad Communist], August 13, 1959, 2. “Kirovabad qardaşlıq və dostluq şəhəridir. Burada Azərbaycanlılarla yanaşı ruslar və ukraynalılar, ermənilər və gürcülər, özbəklər və qazaxlar mehriban bir ailə kimi yaşayırlar.”

⁶⁹ Ibid. “Keçmişdə daşnaq və müsavətlərin qızıqşdırdıqları milli ədavət, irgi ayrı-seçkilik siyasəti indi çoxdan məhv edilmiş.”

⁷⁰ “Dostluğumuz var olsun!” [Long Live Our Friendship!], *Кировабад Коммунисти* [Kirovabad Communist], June 30, 1962, 1.

fondness. State propaganda may have exaggerated the “friendship of peoples” (*druzhba narodov*) by portraying the Soviet Union as a utopian melting pot, but for many, this phrase was not a meaningless slogan that ran contrary to reality. Nearly all respondents remarked how Armenians and Azerbaijanis often celebrated holidays, weddings, funerals, and rites of passage together. Nina, a former resident of the Armenian quarter who moved to Yerevan at the age of seventeen to pursue higher education, discussed how her father acted as a kind of godfather (*kirvə*) who presided over the circumcision of Azerbaijani boys.⁷¹ Many other respondents noted the tradition of asking close Armenian friends to participate in this important ritual, describing it as a symbol of the trust and friendship that existed between them. Aynur, a retired mathematics teacher who lives in Baku, explained that an Armenian “*kirvə* is someone close to such an extent; even closer than your brother.”⁷² Group outings to cultural events where the performers were of mixed nationality were favorite pastimes for many Kirovabadians. To demonstrate the existence of Soviet internationalism, the Azerbaijani accountant and former teacher Gülarə turned to the performing arts, noting that in Kirovabad “there was the Russian Drama Theater, there was the Azerbaijani Drama Theater, yet within it there were Russian, Armenian, as well as Jewish artists [...] The one playing kamancha in the ensemble was Ashot Grigoryan,” an Armenian.⁷³

Respondents often spoke of Armenians and Azerbaijanis not as two distinct groups, but as close relatives and lifelong companions. Gülarə’s refrain that the various nationalities of Kirovabad lived “as a family” was a common theme among interviewees.⁷⁴ Her depiction of seamless coexistence matched other respondents’ testimonies: “Various nationalities lived in a

⁷¹ Nina, interview with author, Yerevan, September 6, 2014.

⁷² Aynur, interview with author, Baku, August 24, 2014. “Кирве—это до такой степени близкий человек. Даже ближе чем твой брат.”

⁷³ Gülarə, interview with author, Ganja, August 12, 2014. “Rus Dram Teatrı var idi, Azərbaycan Dram Teatrı var idi, hətta onun içində erməni, rus, evrei artistləri də var idi [...] Ansamblı, kamança çalan Aşot Qriqoryan.” The kamancha is a traditional bowed stringed instrument.

⁷⁴ Gülarə, interview with author, Ganja, August 7, 2014. “Bir ailə kimi.”

brotherly way without problems. There was no national tension, not at any time. So in the Soviet Union from 1920 until 1988, all nations, Armenian, Russian, Jewish, Lezgin, lived as friends and brothers.”⁷⁵ Aynur recalled that “we were the closest of friends. When we had a bad day they were beside me. On a good day they were by our side.”⁷⁶ Firuzə, a retired Azerbaijani nurse from Kirovabad, stressed that residents got along well and ignored nationality altogether. “Before we worked together, we lived together,” she said, supporting each other in times of need, and the same was true in regards to Russians as well.⁷⁷ When asked to confirm whether Armenians and Azerbaijanis enjoyed such warm relations, Nina did not hesitate to reply “we were friends with them for many long years. They came to us to spend the night, they stayed for days [...] we were friends, we got along normally.”⁷⁸ In short, the consensus among all interviewees was that before 1988, Armenians and Azerbaijanis were a close-knit community in Kirovabad.

Listening to these affirmations of friendship, one is struck by their frequency as well as their vagueness. Interviewees all mentioned similar scenarios of interaction but rarely delved further into these episodes. For Azerbaijani respondents, answering in the affirmative may have been the preferred option given the pressure to conform to state-sanctioned narratives about Armenians, or due to the desire to tell the interviewer what they believed he wanted to hear. Aside from a few noteworthy exceptions, respondents provided few detailed personal examples to illustrate what friendship meant for them in concrete terms. Thus, one is left wondering to what extent respondents projected a rosy image of multinational solidarity onto the past. The tendency to idealize the Soviet period in light of the ongoing, armed conflict between Armenia

⁷⁵ Ibid. “Müxtəlif millətlər problemsiz yaşayıb qardaşcasına [...] Milli ədavət olmuyub, hiç bir vaxt [...] Yani sovet hökumətinin min doqquz yüz iyirminci ildən min doqquz yüz səkkizinci ilə qədər bütün millətlər erməni, rus, yahudi, lezgi, müxtəlif millətlər dost və qardaş kimi yaşayıblar.”

⁷⁶ Aynur, interview with author, Baku, August 24, 2014. “Как самые близкие друзья были. Когда у нас плохой день, они рядом со мной. Хороший день они рядом с нами.”

⁷⁷ Firuzə, interview with author, Ganja, August 17, 2014. “Раньше мы вместе работали, мы вместе жили.”

⁷⁸ Nina, interview with author, Yerevan, September 6, 2014. “Мы долго лет с ними дружили. Они к нам домой приезжали ночевать, днями оставались у нас [...] дружили, нормально дружили.”

and Azerbaijan was evident, yet are positive reflections necessarily inaccurate or disingenuous? Expressions of tolerance and symbiosis are well-rehearsed clichés in the Caucasus, but not inherently untrue if one digs deeper. Interviewees often remarked that one cannot condemn an entire nation for the misdeeds of a few individuals, and Armenians and Azerbaijanis generally retained a favorable impression of each other when the subject of conflict was set aside. Stories of companionship were not simply myths reproduced for the interviewer. In many cases, respondents elaborated on their initial remarks when pressed to comment further, proving that friendly relations were indeed the norm rather than the exception.

Friendship was not limited to cordial relations in the workplace or polite conversations at local markets. The intimate space of one's home was just as often a central meeting place. A former Armenian schoolteacher, Tamar, frequently invited guests into her home where they would while away the hours in each other's company. In a city of tea drinkers, Tamar's coffee was an exotic peculiarity. Azerbaijani friends unaccustomed to drinking coffee regularly flocked to her house to sample her brew and learn how to prepare it. When asked if she had close Azerbaijani friends, Tamar pointed to her long experience as a hostess: "Every Saturday a whole group of our Azerbaijanis came to my house to drink coffee, and look at the cup, and spend time. No, there were friends, I also had good friends; I have already spoken about Dilara and her nephew. I will never forget. There were, there were, of course, there were."⁷⁹ For Tamar, sharing a cup of coffee was a cherished tradition that symbolized the world she has lost, a bittersweet reminder of an irretrievable past.

⁷⁹ Tamar, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. "Каждую субботу ко мне целая компания из наших азербайджанцев приходили ко мне домой пить кофе и чашку посмотреть и время провести. Нет, были друзей, хороших друзей тоже я имела, я уже говорю вот, Дилара и племянник ее. Я никогда не забуду. Были, были, конечно были." The story of Tamar's Azerbaijani friend Dilara and her nephew is featured in the next chapter.

Armenians and Azerbaijanis did not retreat into their respective corners of the city when the opportunity presented itself; instead, they spent much of their leisure time together. In response to an inquiry about the circulation of gossip and trash talk in these circles, Haik and Evgenii emphatically stated that Armenians and Azerbaijanis never touched what one might call the “national issue” when they gathered after work.⁸⁰ Not only was this subject off-limits due to state censorship, people themselves never thought to raise topics that would provoke unpleasant quarrels. Evidently, Kirovabadians did not choose their companions based on nationality, and important occasions such as holidays were never exclusive events. Haik reminded the author that in March during Novruz—a month-long celebration of the coming of spring—Armenians and Azerbaijanis would dine together over mounds of *plov* (battered rice) and partake in the festivities as a group.⁸¹

Childhood remembrances revealed the existence of micro-communities that cut across national lines in certain residential districts. Oksana, a young woman of mixed Slavic origin, grew up during the 1980s in a housing area near the railway station where Russians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians lived together. In this Russophone community, “people all knew who was who,” but nationality was not a dividing line that precluded meaningful social interactions.⁸² In fact, many neighbors were colleagues who frequently attended theater performances and film screenings together and allowed their children to play in the streets with little adult supervision. Tigran, a native of Kirovabad of Armenian-Russian heritage born in 1958, recalled his boyhood days playing with Armenian, Azerbaijani, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian neighbors. When it came to playing football or fighting with other boys from nearby courtyards, Tigran emphasized that they never paid attention to nationality. He attributed this indifference

⁸⁰ Evgenii and Haik, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014.

⁸¹ Haik, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014.

⁸² Oksana, interview with author, Baku, August 21, 2014.

not only to adolescent camaraderie, but also to his upbringing: “My grandmother was from Russia. She was an internationalist by character. She would say that there are not bad nations. There are people. Good and bad [...] I was raised this way since childhood.”⁸³ Evgenii, a long-term Armenian resident of Kirovabad who grew up in a mixed neighborhood surrounded by Azerbaijanis, confirmed that when street fights broke out, boys would not self-segregate but defend their neighbors regardless of nationality.⁸⁴ Though Evgenii was skeptical of the official Soviet narrative about the “friendship of peoples,” saying, “when they write and talk about something so much, that means there are some doubts,” he nevertheless declared that, for him, internationalism existed in reality.⁸⁵

Language was rarely, if ever, a barrier to daily interactions. In addition to speaking Russian, many Armenians and Azerbaijanis often spoke each other’s language fluently, though Haik maintained that Armenians, as a minority in Kirovabad, naturally had a better command of Azerbaijani than Azerbaijanis did of Armenian.⁸⁶ Tigran noted that to the surprise of many Azerbaijanis, his own father, an Armenian, spoke Azerbaijani better than most Azerbaijanis themselves, while his Azerbaijani classmates residing in the Armenian quarter spoke Armenian quite well.⁸⁷ Nationality did not always determine the language of communication between residents even when Armenians and Azerbaijanis spoke amongst themselves. As a native Russian speaker, Tigran claimed that he did not learn Armenian properly until he moved to Yerevan in 1977 to study at a musical conservatory, while Haik learned to read and write in

⁸³ Tigran, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. “Бабушка у меня была из России. Она интернационалистка была по характеру. Она говорила, что плохих наций нет. Есть люди. Хороший, плохой [...] Я с детства так воспиталось.”

⁸⁴ Evgenii, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014.

⁸⁵ Ibid. “Когда о чем-то очень много говорят и пишут, значит на этот счет есть какие-то сомнения.”

⁸⁶ Haik, interview with Tigran, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. Haik was present during and facilitated the interview with Tigran.

⁸⁷ Tigran, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014.

Armenian after leaving Kirovabad in 1989.⁸⁸ Though concentrated in neighborhoods on the right bank of the river, Armenians were not an insular community that spoke only Armenian and avoided contact with Azerbaijanis.

These recollections point to the marginal importance, perhaps even irrelevance, of nationality in many everyday interactions.⁸⁹ Viewing the history of Kirovabad through the prism of later conflict runs the risk of exaggerating the prominence of ethnonational identity, resulting in an “overethnicized view of the social world.”⁹⁰ The empirical evidence presented here supports the theory that “much nominally interethnic interaction is not experientially interethnic” since respondents themselves did not always perceive their daily encounters in ethnonational terms.⁹¹ That is not to say that nationality was absent though. It was, for example, inscribed on the fifth line of internal passports as an immutable category and it could determine one’s career prospects as a titular or non-titular national. To some extent then, “nationality mattered,” in the words of Oksana, as people distinguished who was who amongst themselves, while particular nationalities were “linked to certain professions.”⁹² However, nationality did not govern all social relations. To accept uncritically the salience of nationality in every facet of daily life is to adopt a skewed view of reality, overlooking the many ways in which “world views and a sense of belonging transcended the nation on the Soviet periphery.”⁹³ Residents of Kirovabad may have belonged to one or another national community, but they also identified as Soviet citizens of a

⁸⁸ Ibid; Haik, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014.

⁸⁹ Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 69.1 (Spring 2010): 93-119.

⁹⁰ Rogers Brubaker, “Preoccupations,” in *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 206.

⁹¹ Ibid., “Part Two: Everyday Ethnicity,” in *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity*, 170.

⁹² Oksana, interview with author, Baku, August 21, 2014.

⁹³ Maïke Lehmann, “Apricot Socialism: The National Past, the Soviet Project, and the Imagining of Community in Late Soviet Armenia,” *Slavic Review* 74.1 (Spring 2015): 13.

supranational state.⁹⁴ Recalling what her mother used to tell her about May 1 celebrations in Kirovabad, Oksana described them as truly joyous occasions when national differences faded away as residents paid homage to collective feats of Soviet labor.⁹⁵ One might argue that such reflections form an idyllic representation of Soviet life that is tinged with nostalgia, but more importantly, they speak to the genuine sense of solidarity Soviet citizens shared, as well as the profound feeling of loss engendered by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Divisions, Mistrust, and Tales of the “Other”

Even as interviewees remembered close friends and better times, they admitted that schisms also developed between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Kirovabad. Respondents often spoke of mutual suspicions and fear that at times kept their relationship at arm’s length. In the words of the Armenian schoolteacher Tamar, Armenians and Azerbaijanis “lived, I would not say very peacefully, but not badly. It was tolerable, tolerable, tolerable.”⁹⁶ Returning to this theme later in her testimony, Tamar qualified her initial statement even further, saying that “they lived, but cautiously, they lived but cautiously. You know, some kind of fear was always present. Some kind of fear was present all the time. In this way they generally got along alright.”⁹⁷ This sense of unease appeared in other accounts as well. Nina recalled how she was frightened at the age of twelve or thirteen when Azerbaijani neighbors moved into a house across the street. Although her mother attempted to reassure her by saying “don’t worry, it’s not those Turks, it’s not those Turks,” Nina claimed that some kind of “genetic memory” caused her to become tense

⁹⁴ For a recent discussion of the melding of national and Soviet identities, see Ronald Grigor Suny, “The contradictions of identity: being Soviet and national in the USSR and after,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, eds. Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17, 22-23.

⁹⁵ Oksana, interview with author, Baku, August 21, 2014.

⁹⁶ Tamar, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. “Жили, не сказала бы, что очень мирно, но и не плохо. Терпимо было, терпимо, терпимо.”

⁹⁷ Ibid. “Жили, но осторожно, жили но осторожно. Вы знаете, всегда какой-то страх присутствовал. Какой-то страх, все время присутствовал. А так жили вообще нормально.”

with anxiety upon hearing this news.⁹⁸ As an impressionable young girl who no doubt had heard stories about Turks ravaging Armenian communities in the past, Nina unintentionally associated her new neighbors with the savage Turks of Armenian lore. Reflecting on her mindset at the time, Nina thus thought aloud, “whether it was what I just remembered now, or what my grandmother had told me. How the Turks had attacked them. How the Turks had attacked them, how they had escaped from them in the mountains. [...] There was some sort of hostility. There was some kind of fear, hostility.”⁹⁹ Family histories and painful memories that contradicted the Soviet friendship narrative could raise doubts in the minds of Kirovabad Armenians about the benevolent intentions of their Azerbaijani neighbors and acquaintances, and vice versa.

Physical landmarks and settlement patterns also kept most Armenians and Azerbaijanis at some distance from each other. The fact that the Ganjachai River split the city into a central district (left bank) inhabited mostly by Azerbaijanis and a predominately Armenian quarter (right bank) reinforced an imagined geography of difference. Nina explained that when she was a child the thought of leaving the Armenian quarter filled her with a sense of foreboding. The opposite bank appeared threatening and dangerous in comparison to her neighborhood where she could move about freely: “I could, as a seven-year-old child, walk alone from home to school because I went along only Armenian streets, but they never would have let me go to the Azerbaijani side even in the tenth class [...] I would have been afraid to go.”¹⁰⁰ Venturing unaccompanied to the other side of the river to the so-called *tiurkskaia chast’* (Turkish section), especially during the

⁹⁸ Nina, interview with author, Yerevan, September 6, 2014. “Моя мама меня успокоила. Говорит, что ‘ты не бойся, это не те, тюрки, да, это не те тюрки’”; “Ну вот какая-то генетическая память я помню была.”

⁹⁹ Ibid. “То ли вот я сейчас только что вспомнил, то ли бабушка мне рассказывала. Как на них нападали тюрки. Как на них нападали тюрки, как они от них спасались в горах [...] Ну вот какая-то неприязнь была. Какая-то боязнь была, неприязнь была.”

¹⁰⁰ Nina, interview with author, Yerevan, September 6, 2014. “Я одна могла из дому, семилетний ребенок да, одна пойти в школу, ну потому что я шла по всем армянским, а вот в азербайджанскую часть мне одна никогда бы не пустили даже в десятом классе [...] я бы одна бы боялась пойти.”

evening, was unthinkable for Nina.¹⁰¹ Whether she truly dreaded the prospect of entering a majority-Azerbaijani area or was simply fearful of wandering too far from home as a young girl is unclear, but her own mental map divided the city into two distinct spheres—one familiar and tranquil, and the other alien and treacherous. At the same time, many Azerbaijanis felt that Armenians were an inward-looking nation given their tendency to settle amongst other Armenians. Aynur, the former mathematics teacher from Baku, noted that “Armenians are a compact people” who generally lived with their extended families in the most desirable areas, whether in upscale districts of Baku or in villages in the foothills of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains near Kirovabad.¹⁰² Unfortunately, as time wore on, their residence in densely populated Armenians areas would reinforce the belief that Armenians were scheming up plots against Azerbaijanis.

Despite their immersion in a shared Soviet culture, respondents noted that Armenians and Azerbaijanis still clung to their own customs. While intermarriage was not uncommon in the Caucasus—in fact, the Soviet government encouraged such “international” unions—the former Armenian engineer Evgenii conceded that Armenians did not want their daughters to marry Azerbaijani men, an unwritten cultural norm that Haik ascribed to the Armenian national mentality.¹⁰³ But Azerbaijanis, who were less sovietized according to Evgenii, were even more inclined to observe their Islamic traditions, and, as a result, Azerbaijani women rarely married men of different nationalities.¹⁰⁴ Armenians and Azerbaijanis had many physical traits in common, but Tigran stated that their personal conduct often betrayed their identity. When asked whether Armenians and Azerbaijanis could distinguish each other by outward appearance alone,

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Nina noted that Armenians referred to Azerbaijanis as “Turks” in colloquial language and called the left bank of the river the “Turkish section.”

¹⁰² Aynur, interview with author, Baku, August 24, 2014. “Армяне компактный народ.”

¹⁰³ Evgenii and Haik, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

he answered that Azerbaijanis “knew exactly that he [an Armenian], even if he resembles an Azerbaijani three times over, is nevertheless not an Azerbaijani. They felt it [...] they could tell that he wasn’t a Muslim.”¹⁰⁵ Living in close proximity to one another, Armenians and Azerbaijanis were keenly aware of the marked differences in their upbringing and worldviews, Tigran concluded.

Anxiety about the “other” often lay buried in popular expressions that surfaced from time to time. Just before the end of her interview, Nina recalled a proverb her father used to tell her: “Make friends with an Azerbaijani, but don’t throw the stick from your hands.”¹⁰⁶ Elaborating on the supposedly aggressive inclinations of the “Turk,” she added that one must remain on guard, for “at any moment it can be useful, they can harm you, strike you from behind.”¹⁰⁷ Among Azerbaijani respondents, Gülarə also drew attention to the circulation of such discourse among Armenians, noting that parents would often remind their children that the “Turk” is their sworn enemy.¹⁰⁸ One can only speculate as to what extent this was true, but given many Armenians’ long historical memory one can assume that tales of Turkish savagery did not fade into oblivion among those whose ancestors perished in, or fled from, the Ottoman Empire, or suffered at the hands of “Tatars” in the Russian Empire’s twilight years. But just as some Armenians spoke of the terrible “Turk,” so too did Azerbaijanis malign Armenians. Haik and Tigran, two Armenian friends who later met in Yerevan after fleeing Kirovabad, described how the Azerbaijani word for “Armenian” (*erməni*) became a curse and a term of opprobrium in phrases like “you’re a

¹⁰⁵ Tigran, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. “Они четко знали, что вот он даже если он трижды похож на азербайджанца все равно не азербайджанец. Они чувствовали [...] они четко знали мусульманин нет.”

¹⁰⁶ Nina, interview with author, Yerevan, September 6, 2014. “Дружи с азербайджанцем, но палку не бросай с рук.”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. “В любой момент может пригодиться, они могут с стороны спины, да, тебе нанести вред, удар нанести.”

¹⁰⁸ Gülarə, conversation with author, Ganja, August 6, 2014.

good guy, it's a shame you're Armenian.”¹⁰⁹ Mariam, an Armenian researcher born in Azerbaijan, recounted the story of an Armenian friend from Kirovabad who expressed shock upon hearing her Azerbaijani colleague sing a ditty to her baby along the lines of “little one, little one, cutting an Armenian like this, little one,” the message of which the mother did not grasp.¹¹⁰ Though these sayings were not meant to incite hatred, they reveal how discourse about the “other” was embedded in colloquial language and folklore.

Jokes abounded during the era of late socialism, but they rarely soured relations between close friends who teased each other when nationalist sentiments arose during conversations.¹¹¹ Rüstəm, a former Azerbaijani politician and a Bakuvian steeped in the city's heterogeneous milieu as a young man, described how the warnings of Azerbaijanis inclined toward nationalism were met with incredulity. Their contention that the growth of Armenian chauvinism ““is a sign of future disaster, you will see, believe me”” seemed farfetched to Rüstəm, who maintained that “no one believed them” at first.¹¹² Taunts that would be considered incendiary today appeared harmless at the time. His Armenian friends would make jokes along the lines of “you are Muslims, we are Armenians, you are Turks [...] you are aggressive, you are stupid, we are wise,” but in the end they would laugh it off.¹¹³ Rüstəm recalled that only later would the warnings about Armenian nationalism appear prophetic to him, beginning in the late 1960s or early 1970s when he struggled to understand why beloved Armenian football players had switched from the Baku team Neftçi to the Yerevan club, Ararat. Gradually Rüstəm began to feel that Armenians were “not honest with us” because they concealed their antipathy toward

¹⁰⁹ Haik, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. Haik remembered this phrase during Tigran's interview: “Yaxşı oğlansan, ayıb ermənisan.”

¹¹⁰ Mariam, interview with author, Tbilisi, August 29, 2014. “Bala bala, ay belə, erməni kesən bala.”

¹¹¹ See Bruce Grant, ““Cosmopolitan Baku,”” *Ethnos* 75.2 (June 2010): 130-31.

¹¹² Rüstəm, interview with author, Baku, Azerbaijan, August 26, 2014. Interview conducted in English.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Azerbaijanis, and so they acquired the “label of ‘*nevernykh liudei*’” (unfaithful people)—a stigma attached to them for the remainder of the Soviet period.¹¹⁴ This realization, Rüstəm argued, marked a major turning point in his life when being a Bakuvian (*bakinets*) became less important than reclaiming a submerged Azerbaijani identity.

More often than not, however, tension did not translate into physical aggression in the late Soviet period. Kirovabad did not witness any major violence for nearly 70 years, but passions flared up occasionally, for example, when minor tussles broke out between Armenian and Azerbaijani boys vying for the best swimming holes on the Ganjachai River, and when Armenians accidentally found themselves alone in an unfamiliar part of town where only Azerbaijanis lived.¹¹⁵ Nationalist squabbles of a higher order rarely came to blows, but many respondents noted that confrontations did take place after football matches. Grigorii Oganezov, a former Armenian resident of Kirovabad, recalls in his memoirs the chaos that resulted from a 1959 match between Kirovabad and Leninakan (present-day Gyumri, Armenia) in which the Kirovabad team lost. Despite the fact that the two cities were “brotherly” cities playing on friendly terms, Azerbaijani supporters of the Kirovabad team smashed the windows of Armenian homes in the vicinity of the stadium (also located in the Armenian quarter), initiating a three-day riot in which ten Armenians perished.¹¹⁶ Though one cannot corroborate this report given the lack of documentary evidence, it suggests that supposedly benign sporting events could arouse latent national sentiments. They were the most visible manifestation of the friction between Armenians and Azerbaijanis that never disappeared completely. Even if not so pronounced, images of and

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Haik and Evgenii, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014. Haik referred to scuffles on the river as детские шалости, or “childish pranks.”

¹¹⁶ Grigorii Oganezov, *The Self-Defense of the Armenians of Kirovabad*, 347-48. An article entitled “Today in Kutaisi” published in *Kirovabad Worker* in 1956 mentions the friendly competition between the three “brotherly” cities of Kirovabad, Leninakan, and Kutaisi. В. Вадачкория, “Сегодня в Кутаиси,” *Кировабадский Рабочий*, January 11, 1956, 3.

assumptions about the “other” did exist, and they complicate the picture of the inviolable friendship of peoples proclaimed in local newspapers. As the next section seeks to demonstrate, the master narratives of Soviet brotherhood failed to supplant alternative versions of history that gained momentum during the Khrushchev years (1956-1964).

The Contested Past: Competing Historical Narratives

Football hooliganism is one manifestation of nationalism, but the ethnicization of historical scholarship is arguably more pernicious. Among the rifts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis that generated great controversy in the late Soviet period were the incompatible versions of history that denigrated the other side’s claims. In the decades after the Second World War, national historians gradually rose to prominence in Armenia and Azerbaijan, engaging in fierce debates about the pre-Soviet history of their republics and which nation was entitled to regions such as Nagorno Karabakh. Kirovabadians themselves agreed that sensitive historical issues were taboo subjects that they consciously avoided, but they also indicated that historical memories did not fade with time. Haik explained that despite official censorship, “Azerbaijanis as well as Armenians [...] both knew that there were conflicts, and that there will be more. That there was a genocide [...] They always remembered.”¹¹⁷ Yet, since public discussion was forbidden, certain episodes in their difficult history, such as the massacres in 1905 and 1918, remained unaddressed during the Soviet period. As one Armenian researcher knowledgeable about Kirovabad elaborated:

There was always something left unsaid between Armenians-Kirovabadians. Each concealed his own memory and history, but it did not always manifest itself in such personal relations, it rarely manifested itself. Everyone restrained him or herself. I am sure this is also because they knew, each of them, their part of

¹¹⁷ Haik, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014. “И азербайджанцы и армяне [...] обе знали, что были конфликты, и будут еще. Был геноцид [...] Они все время помнили.”

history and because this was never discussed, and this was a forbidden topic both from an ethical point of view and out of political correctness.¹¹⁸

If residents of Kirovabad were reticent about voicing their interpretations of history in the past, they now seem to do so with confidence. In their testimonies, many Armenian respondents referred to Kirovabad by its old Armenian name, Gandzak, and insisted on its Armenian heritage. Tellingly, Tamar began her interview by stating that “Kirovabad is an ancient Armenian city. Ancient, a very ancient city.”¹¹⁹ Likewise, when asked what an outsider should know about Kirovabad, Nina replied, “it’s important to know that Kirovabad was an Armenian city.”¹²⁰ Although she acknowledged that Kirovabad was multinational, she was resolute in identifying the preeminent population: “In this city, we, Armenians, we lived like the masters of this city during Soviet times.”¹²¹ According to Tigran, Armenian princes and Muslim khans long ruled the city together, but by the early twentieth century the urban elite of Transcaucasia consisted of educated Armenians and Georgians because Azerbaijanis remained uncivilized and incapable of governing. None of these respondents denied the historical presence of “Turks” in the city, but the common thread linking their statements was that Armenians were the principal agents of change and progress and therefore the backbone of civic life.

Even tales of friendship could shift abruptly to long digressions about the distant past. After describing the intimate relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Kirovabad, Nina suddenly plunged into antiquity, speaking of a Greater Armenia that once bordered the Caspian, Black, and Mediterranean seas, whereas Azerbaijan was nonexistent as a political entity until

¹¹⁸ Mariam, interview with author, Tbilisi, August 29, 2014. “Всегда между армянами кировабадцами была некоторая недосказанность. Каждый затаил свою память и свою историю, но это в таких личных человеческих отношениях не всегда проявлялось, скорее всего очень редко проявлялось. Каждый сдерживал себя. Я уверена это также оттого, что они знали, каждый, свою часть истории и так как это никогда не обсуждалось, и это была тема запретная, была запретная и с этической стороны и с политкорректности.”

¹¹⁹ Tamar, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. “Кировабад—это старинный армянский город. Старинный, очень старинный город.”

¹²⁰ Nina, interview with author, Yerevan, September 6, 2014. “Важно знать, что это был армянский город.”

¹²¹ Ibid. “Мы в этом городе, да вот армяне, мы жили в советское время как хозяева этого города.”

1918. What she regarded as irrefutable historical evidence of Armenia's continuous statehood in Asia Minor and the Caucasus thus negated Azerbaijani claims to possession of the same territories. Nina added that even the province of Azerbaijan in northern Iran, which most Azerbaijanis consider to be the southern half of their ancestral lands unjustly separated in 1828, has no relation to today's Republic of Azerbaijan. Armenian respondents' comments mirrored the arguments of Armenian historians who view Azerbaijan as an artificial polity with only shallow historical roots dating to the early twentieth century. Echoing Nina's remarks, Tamar explained that the Bolsheviks invented Azerbaijan with disastrous consequences: "Lenin founded Azerbaijan as a state. Due to his mistake, due to Stalin's mistake, our people are suffering."¹²² The specter of Turkic encirclement looms large in the imagination of some who see Armenia, wedged between two hostile neighbors, as the sole Christian state preventing the establishment of a "Greater Turan" stretching from Turkey to Central Asia.¹²³

Several respondents traced the roots of conflicting historical narratives to the "Thaw"-era politicization of history under Nikita Khrushchev (1956-64). His de-Stalinization drive, initiated by his "Secret Speech" at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, ushered in a period of relaxed censorship that lifted constraints on previously taboo expressions of national identity. One might argue that it even launched a second phase of *korenizatsiia* that resulted in further concessions to nationalities. In the early 1960s, for example, Armenians dethroned a monument of Stalin from his perch above Yerevan, later installing an oversized Mother Armenia statue in 1968, and paid homage to national heroes such as Mesrop Mashtots and General Andranik with festive

¹²² Tamar, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. "Азербайджан как государство создал Ленин. По его ошибке, по ошибке Сталина, наш народ страдает."

¹²³ Nina, interview with author, Yerevan, September 6, 2014.

ceremonies and new monuments.¹²⁴ Then, on April 24, 1965, residents of Yerevan commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide with rowdy public demonstrations that threatened to destabilize the capital. Though tinged with nationalism—demonstrators carried posters bearing the slogan “Our Lands,” ostensibly referring to eastern Turkey but more likely nodding toward Nagorno Karabakh—the protests were not manifestations of anti-Soviet sentiment.¹²⁵ To the contrary, participants couched their demands for genocide recognition and the transfer of Karabakh to Armenia in the language of Soviet socialism.¹²⁶ Their inclination to “speak Bolshevik,” however, was not simply a strategic ploy to legitimize territorial claims; instead, it pointed to the merging of Soviet and national identities. Armenians had not renounced their Soviet citizenship by any means, yet the unveiling of a Genocide Memorial in Yerevan in 1967, and the growing number of petitions to transfer Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia from this time onward, also demonstrated their ability to advance national interests in a changing political climate.¹²⁷

Khrushchev’s “Thaw” also accelerated the nationalization of history as Armenian and Azerbaijani scholars bickered over which nation had the most legitimate grounds to reclaim certain historical groups and territories as their own. Competition over remote ancestors became a routine feature of scholarly works where historians marshaled selective evidence to support their theories of ethnogenesis. Disputes largely revolved around the issue of who could lay claim to the obscure group known as the Caucasian Albanians who once inhabited much of eastern

¹²⁴ De Waal, “Awakening, 1965,” in *Great Catastrophe: Armenians and Turks in the Shadow of Genocide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 141; Lehmann, “Apricot Socialism,” 29.

¹²⁵ De Waal, “Awakening, 1965,” in *Great Catastrophe*, 143.

¹²⁶ Lehmann, “Apricot Socialism,” 18-28.

¹²⁷ De Waal, “Awakening, 1965,” 147-48. On the latter point, see Arsène Saparov, *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus: The Soviet Union and the making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh* (Abingdon and London: Routledge, 2015).

Transcaucasia.¹²⁸ Commenting on this fractious debate, the Armenian researcher Mariam identified the Azerbaijani scholar Ziya Buniatov as the main architect of the “Albanianization” of Azerbaijani history who doctored his sources to make Albanians appear as precursors to today’s Azerbaijanis.¹²⁹ Though the Albanian thesis provoked controversy mostly among professional historians of Armenia and Azerbaijan, it also affected personal relationships. Tigran recalled a poignant conversation he had in Kirovabad in 1988 with an Azerbaijani friend, a historian, who insisted that Nagorno Karabakh was historically an Azerbaijani province. This moment crystallized for Tigran the distortion of history taking place in Azerbaijani academia. Whereas in the late 1950s a three-volume *History of Azerbaijan* had acknowledged the Armenians’ long historical presence in Karabakh, which the authors referred to by its Armenian name, “Artsakh,” Tigran described how over the course of twenty years the narrative had changed completely, emphasizing Karabakh’s Albanian heritage and the Armenians’ late arrival as immigrants from Persia in the early nineteenth century.¹³⁰ Crude revisionism is often associated with the post-Soviet period, but nationalist historians were crafting mutually exclusive narratives already in the Soviet Union’s later decades.

Without a doubt, historical debates in the Caucasus were among the most contentious in the Soviet Union. However, the content of these tendentious historical works was not so much a departure from conventional wisdom, as it was a radical extension of Soviet scholarship on ethnonational groups. The prevailing view among scholars even before the 1960s was that all Soviet nations were enduring collectivities deeply rooted in their native lands. Indeed, as Victor Shnirelman has argued, the Soviet Union adopted a primordial view of ethnicity in which the

¹²⁸ For more on this controversy, see De Waal, “Hurekavank: The Unpredictable Past,” in *Black Garden*, 158-71; Jeremy Smith, “Stability and national development: the Brezhnev years, 1964-1982,” in *Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 226.

¹²⁹ Mariam, interview with author, Tbilisi, August 29, 2014.

¹³⁰ Tigran, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014.

various Soviet “peoples” were “rigidly defined, as if they had clear boundaries and cultural continuity in a given area” since time immemorial.¹³¹ This conception of ethnicity thus tied ethnic groups to particular territories (e.g., union republics or autonomous regions) as their “homelands” that implicitly belonged to the titular nationality.¹³² Since the Bolsheviks intentionally designed republics as territorial entities “*of and for the nations for whom they were named,*” they gradually fostered “a sense of ‘ownership’” among titular nationals over the course of the Soviet period.¹³³ Historians in Armenia and Azerbaijan reinforced this idea by emphasizing their nation’s age-old settlement in areas where their rivals strove to prove just the opposite. Yet the war of words being waged in academic journals did not affect ordinary people as greatly as the preferential treatment of titular nationals in the workplace. As the next section aims to illustrate, Kirovabad Armenians more often recalled not chauvinistic histories, but the indigenization policies that restricted their access to certain positions.

Nationalization under First Secretary Heydar Aliyev

Aside from discussing latent tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in general terms, respondents also gave concrete examples of what they perceived to be explicit policies directed against their national group. One point of convergence in narratives on both sides of the border is the role of manipulative political elites, but whereas most Azerbaijanis regarded Mikhail Gorbachev as the main culprit (see next chapter), some Armenians singled out Heydar Aliyev—the First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party from 1969-82 and future

¹³¹ Victor A. Shnirelman, “The Effect of Soviet Ideology on Anthropological Theory,” in *Who Gets the Past? Competition for Ancestors among Non-Russian Intellectuals in Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1996), 11-12.

¹³² For a discussion of the growing “sense of homeland” among titular nations in the late Soviet period, see Robert J. Kaiser, “Political Indigenization and the Disintegration of the USSR,” in *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 325-377.

¹³³ Rogers Brubaker, “Nationhood and the national question in the Soviet Union and its successor states,” in *Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 45, 46. Also on this point, see Rasma Karklins, “The Ethnic Climate in Non-Russian Republics,” in *Ethnic Relations in the USSR: The Perspective from Below* (Winchester: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 48-76.

president of Azerbaijan (1993-2003)—as the source of their woes during the Brezhnev years (1964-82) when the republic underwent administrative restructuring along national lines. Armenian residents recalled the Brezhnev era as the period when being Armenian was a handicap that reduced their chances of promotion in various sectors. Some even characterized the undisguised preference for Azerbaijanis as an attempt to expel Armenians from Kirovabad altogether.

One might question the extent to which Aliyev's policies were a deliberate campaign to marginalize and oust Armenians, but he did preside over an era of greater indigenization that cemented his authority and elevated the status of Azerbaijanis as the titular nationality. The practice of appointing Azerbaijanis to leading administrative positions coincided with the devolution of power to regional party leaders.¹³⁴ Indeed, Aliyev's ascendancy occurred at a time when "Caucasian republican party bosses came to resemble powerful feudal princes" who wielded considerable influence within and beyond their borders.¹³⁵ By replacing functionaries with trustworthy allies, Aliyev managed to create a vast patronage network across Azerbaijan, thereby bringing the "extensive republican apparatus under his control."¹³⁶ Meanwhile, he maneuvered carefully to encourage greater national expression within acceptable limits, as evidenced by the shift in content of the Azerbaijan Writers' Union monthly journal *Azerbaijan* from pro-Russian to national themes under his tenure as First Secretary.¹³⁷ Aliyev proved remarkably adept at adhering to "the official Moscow line while, at the same time, promoting the separate Azerbaijani identity through cultural production."¹³⁸ Maintaining this balance enabled

¹³⁴ See Kaiser, "Political Indigenization and the Disintegration of the USSR," 340-77.

¹³⁵ Thomas de Waal, "The Soviet Caucasus," in *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 92.

¹³⁶ Altstadt, "The Era of Heydar Aliyev (1969-1987)," in *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 180.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 188; and Jeremy Smith, "Stability and national development: the Brezhnev years, 1964-1982," in *Red Nations*, 224.

¹³⁸ Jeremy Smith, "Stability and national development: the Brezhnev years, 1964-1982," in *Red Nations*, 224.

him to curry favor with the central authorities, including Soviet premier Brezhnev—eventually leading to Aliyev’s promotion to the Politburo in 1982—while cultivating his image as a national leader who inspired his people and guided Azerbaijan toward a radiant future.¹³⁹ Brezhnev was apparently so impressed with the pace of industrialization in Azerbaijan, according to Gülarə, that he proclaimed “Azerbaijan is stepping forward with great strides.”¹⁴⁰ Though he fashioned himself as a dedicated servant of Moscow, Aliyev skillfully laid the groundwork for the gradual nationalization of Soviet institutions in Azerbaijan.

Some interviewees regarded his policies as a strategy designed to uproot Armenians from Kirovabad. For respondents like the former schoolteacher Tamar, Aliyev’s ascension to power represented the point when everything took a turn for the worse: “Aliyev ruined our life. It’s he who did everything. Before this we lived normally, normally.”¹⁴¹ Convinced that Aliyev intentionally discriminated against Armenians, Tamar declared that “he conducted an anti-Armenian policy, anti-Armenian” by reshuffling labor hierarchies to their disadvantage.¹⁴² Whereas before, “all superiors were Armenians,” Aliyev altered existing institutional arrangements to privilege Azerbaijanis and demote Armenians: “Where an Armenian was the director of a factory, he became a manager. And he who was an engineer was released from work altogether.”¹⁴³ Tamar maintained that unlike their less skilled Azerbaijani counterparts, “we had exceptionally good specialists,” and even some Azerbaijanis lamented the loss of competent

¹³⁹ For a discussion of how “nationalities experienced an unprecedented degree of local autonomy” under the leadership of influential elites such as Aliyev in the late Soviet period, see Suny, “The contradictions of identity,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, 31.

¹⁴⁰ Gülarə, interview with author, Ganja, August 12, 2014. “Широко шагает Азербайджан.”

¹⁴¹ Tamar, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. “Алиев испортил нашу жизнь. Это он все сделал. До этого жили нормально, нормально жили.”

¹⁴² Ibid. “Он вел антиармянскую политику, антиармянскую.”

¹⁴³ Ibid. “Все главные начальники были армяне”; “Где армянин был директором завода, стал менеджером. А тот был который инженер, вообще освободился с работы.”

Armenian workers, saying that “the wise heads have left, and the gold teeth have moved in.”¹⁴⁴ Armenians, it seems, were particularly bitter about their changing fortunes since they regarded themselves as the educated stratum of society whose expertise had always been in high demand.

As nationalization accelerated, Armenians increasingly faced an “economic pressure” (*ekonomicheskoe davlenie*) that prompted some educated Armenians to leave Kirovabad permanently.¹⁴⁵ Not only did the formation of “native” cadres catalyze Armenian outmigration starting in the 1960s, it allowed, according to Tamar, Azerbaijanis to purchase Armenian homes and tilt the city’s demographic balance in favor of Azerbaijanis. In her eyes, then, the influx of Azerbaijanis to the Armenian quarter was far from innocuous: “That was their policy, so that Azerbaijanis lived mixed with Armenians. Before in our area, in the Armenian area, there were no Azerbaijanis at all [...] Before Aliyev there were none. Not a single family lived in this second part of the city.”¹⁴⁶ Nina recounted how Azerbaijanis moved into Armenian houses only later, but she was certain that this practice was a calculated plan to dislodge Armenians because “they always tried to expel Armenians from there. All the time they tried to force them out.”¹⁴⁷ From sending only Armenians to the front during the Second World War (1941-45) to denying them work in the postwar decades, Nina saw a clear continuity in anti-Armenian policies in Azerbaijan.

Whatever ulterior motives may have existed, the consolidation of national cadres during the 1960s-70s in Azerbaijan prevented many Armenians from achieving upward mobility. Several respondents noted that the third secretary of the Kirovabad branch of the Communist

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. “У нас были исключительно хорошие специалисты”; “Умные голова ушли, золотые зубы пришли.”

¹⁴⁵ Haik, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014.

¹⁴⁶ Tamar, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. “Это их [...] политика была, чтобы вместе с армянами смешанно жили и азербайджанцы. А раньше в нашей части, армянской части, азербайджанцев не было вообще [...] До Алиева не было. Ни одной семьи не жила в это во второй части города.”

¹⁴⁷ Nina, interview with author, Yerevan, September 6, 2014. “Армян все время старались вытеснить оттуда. Все время старались вытеснять.”

Party was always an Armenian, but the highest posts were reserved specifically for Azerbaijanis. As the former engineer Evgenii explained, only a limited number of Armenians could occupy certain high-level posts: “How many Armenian directors there could be, how many Armenian deputies in the local soviet, how many in the upper soviet [...] what kind of Party status. All of this was taken into account.”¹⁴⁸ Yet, he conceded that the Azerbaijani leadership was not unique in establishing such quotas, which also existed in neighboring republics at that time. Moreover, it was often the case that expertise was recognized before nationality, which allowed Haik, as well as other Armenian specialists, to hold respectable jobs despite restrictions.¹⁴⁹ But not everyone agreed that the Soviet government favored Azerbaijanis at the expense of Armenians. The Baku pensioner Aynur insisted that the system of ranks within the republican bureaucracy never changed, explaining that “if the first [...] goes to an Azerbaijani, then his second deputy must be Armenian or Russian or Jewish for all posts,” without exception.¹⁵⁰ Azerbaijan, she stressed, was the only Soviet republic able to uphold the principle of internationalism to such an extent that those Azerbaijani men who married women of other nationalities received additional material benefits.¹⁵¹ In the Brezhnev years, then, many Armenians still occupied special niches where they could live comfortably, but there was also a conscious attempt to raise the profile of Azerbaijanis who clearly benefitted from the state’s affirmative action policies.

Aliyev continued to engage in image management and nation building under the guise of internationalism. His emerging cult of personality was on full display during a special visit to

¹⁴⁸ Evgenii, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014. “Сколько может быть армян директоров, сколько армян депутатов местного совета, депутатов верховного совета [...] какой партийный статус [...] вот это все учитывалось.”

¹⁴⁹ Haik, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014. Haik downplayed nationality, saying, “they hired us not as Armenians, but as able specialists.” (Нас принимали на работу не как армянина, а как хорошего специалиста.)

¹⁵⁰ Aynur, interview with author, Baku, August 24, 2014. “Если первый [...] идет азербайджанский, второй его заместитель обязательно армянин или русский или еврей по всем должностям.”

¹⁵¹ Two other Azerbaijani respondents (Rüstəm and Gülarə) hinted at the financial incentives for intermarriage, but they did not confirm whether the Soviet government implemented such a policy.

Kirovabad in September 1979. Arriving in the company of Marshal Bagramyan, a decorated Armenian military commander who grew up in the city, Aliyev hailed local residents' achievements and described "multinational Kirovabad" as "one of the most ancient centers of the culture of the Azerbaijani people."¹⁵² Aliyev's trip was no doubt intended to showcase the "friendship of peoples" with Bagramyan in tow, but Aliyev, then in his tenth year in office, largely eclipsed Kirovabad's native son in press coverage of the event.¹⁵³ Clearly, the man of the hour was not the general who served in the Second World War and was twice awarded the honor of "Hero of the Soviet Union," but the First Secretary who stood at the helm of the republic. Local dignitaries, such as the First Secretary of the Kirovabad City Committee, heaped praise on Aliyev and described his visit as a truly momentous occasion: "...[C]omrades, this is the first arrival of comrade Heydar Aliyevich Aliyev, beloved son of the Azerbaijani people, in our city bearing the title of Hero"—in reference to the honorary title of Hero of Socialist Labor recently bestowed upon Aliyev.¹⁵⁴ In response, Aliyev downplayed his personal accomplishments by saying "comrades, I consider this award as high estimation of the labor successes of all workers of Azerbaijan [...] I view this award as an award given to all of us."¹⁵⁵ Even with these familiar platitudes, Aliyev's speech was the ultimate exercise in self-fashioning, and with a decade of experience to his credit, Aliyev had crafted a convincing image of the loyal Party leader humbly serving his people. More than any figure before or after him, Aliyev instilled the idea among Azerbaijanis that they were the masters of their republic who deserved to direct its course of development.

¹⁵² "Выступление Г.А. Алиева" [The Address of G.A. Aliyev], *Кировабадский Рабочий* [Kirovabad Worker], September 25, 1979, 2, 1. "...многонациональный Кировабад"; "...один из древнейших центров культуры азербайджанского народа."

¹⁵³ Ibid., 1-3.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 2. "...товарищи, это первый приезд товарища Алиева Гейдара Алиевича, любимого сына азербайджанского народа, в наш город со званием Героя."

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. "Товарищи, эту награду я рассматриваю как высокую оценку трудовых успехов всех трудящихся Азербайджана [...] Я рассматриваю эту награду как награду, данную всем нам."

Kirovabad's Twilight Years

By the mid-1980s, Kirovabad was touted as an emblem of Soviet modernity. A tourist photo album published in 1984 triumphantly proclaims that “the city, possessing a rich history, is growing and improving with each passing day,” and “the future of Kirovabad will be even more beautiful and brighter.”¹⁵⁶ Although the apogee of Socialist Realism had passed, the book exemplifies an effort to portray Soviet life not as it was, but as it was *becoming*. In glowing tones, the authors contrast the city’s backwardness before the October Revolution of 1917 with the dawn of socialism that had transformed Kirovabad into a model Soviet town with a flourishing industry and vibrant cultural life. Photographs include familiar scenes and themes from everyday life featured in newspapers of the period, with images of residents strolling through the city center to factory floors to festivals of poetry and song to statues of Soviet leaders such as Sergei Kirov (see Figures 6-9). Despite the flashy facades of public buildings and the rise of multistory apartment blocks, much of Kirovabad as depicted in the brochure retains the appearance of a sprawling village of low-strung houses with small gardens and courtyards where residents would mingle together (see Figure 10). Tellingly, however, the accompanying text does not mention Kirovabad’s multiethnic population, stressing instead the city’s ancient Azerbaijani heritage: “Old Ganja is a city in which the rich traditions the Azerbaijani people have lived since time immemorial.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ S. İsmayilova and S. Guliyev, eds., *Kirovabad* (Baku: Ishiq Publishers, 1984). “Город, имеющий богатую историю, развивается и хорошеет с каждым днем”; “Завтрашний день Кировабада будет еще краше и светлее.”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. “Старая Гянджа—это город, в котором испокон веков жили и живут богатые традиции азербайджанского народа.”



Fig. 6: Around the *univermag* (undated)



Fig. 7: Inside the Carpet Factory (undated)



Fig. 8: Song Festival (undated)



Fig. 9: Monument to Sergei Kirov (undated)

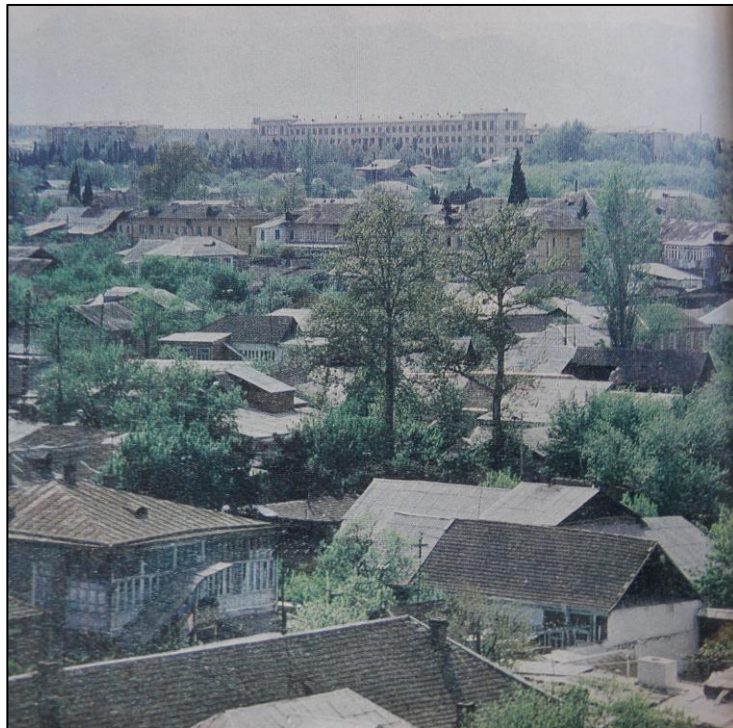


Fig. 10: City Overview (undated)

Of course, the “friendship of peoples” was still a ubiquitous theme, and the local authorities continued to devote considerable resources to keeping its moribund slogan afloat. Elaborate ceremonies and construction projects remained the preferred venues for exhibiting internationalism. In 1982, on the sixtieth anniversary of the Soviet Union’s foundation, Kirovabad opened a “palace” dedicated to the friendship of peoples commemorating the fact that “in our city more than 70 nations and peoples live and work in one brotherly family.”¹⁵⁸ Just north of Kirovabad, a youth festival held with great fanfare every year at the Red Bridge border crossing between Azerbaijan and Georgia symbolized the unity of the three Caucasian nations.¹⁵⁹ Kirovabad preserved its brotherly ties with the cities of Leninakan and Kutaisi as proof of its commitment to a transnational orientation.¹⁶⁰ As it displayed its multinational credentials, however, the local government also fashioned Kirovabad as an Azerbaijani city, as evidenced by the anniversary celebrations of the medieval poet Nizami Ganjavi at his mausoleum on the city outskirts.¹⁶¹ Although Nizami had made his debut as a state-sponsored “national poet” as early as the 1930s when he was appropriated as an Azerbaijani writer, his persona remained the central focus of cultural life in Kirovabad decades later.¹⁶² In an effort to reclaim more historical figures as national heroes, a memorial park featuring statues of famous local writers from earlier centuries was opened in a model residential district called “New Ganja.”¹⁶³ The proliferation of

¹⁵⁸ N. Mamedova, “Дворец дружбы—дворец счастья народов” [Palace of Friendship—Palace of the People’s Happiness], *Кировабадский Рабочий* [Kirovabad Worker], December 21, 1982, 1. “В нашем городе в единой братской семье живут и трудятся более 70 наций и народностей.”

¹⁵⁹ Z. Aga-zade, “Красная нить” [Red Thread], *Молодежь Азербайджана* [Youth of Azerbaijan], November 24, 1983, 3.

¹⁶⁰ Qiyas Humbətov, “Şəhərlərimizin beynəlmiləl dostluğu,” [Our Cities’ International Friendship], *Кировабад Коммунисти* [Kirovabad Communist], February 27, 1987, 2.

¹⁶¹ “Nizami vətəndə poeziya bayramı,” [Poetry Festival in Nizami’s Native Land] *Кировабад Коммунисти* [Kirovabad Communist], September 27, 1986, 1.

¹⁶² For a description of the canonization of people’s writers in the 1930s, see Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53.2 (Summer 1994): 446-47.

¹⁶³ N. Mamedova, “Мемориальный парк,” [Memorial Park], *Кировабадский Рабочий* [Kirovabad Worker], September 1, 1984, 3.

such monuments remained within the acceptable boundaries of national expression, but they signaled a turn toward distinctly Azerbaijani rather than Soviet themes.

When Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the office of General Secretary in 1985, Kirovabad was well on its way to becoming a national city in an Azerbaijani “homeland.” If Soviet newspapers had extolled the city’s multinational character in previous decades, they now emphasized Kirovabad’s Azerbaijani pedigree more than ever. This subtle shift in media discourse mirrored a process of nativization that had been remarkably successful in placing Azerbaijanis at the forefront of their republic. In the coming years, this position would harden as a result of reduced censorship. Gorbachev’s plan to reinvigorate Soviet society through *glasnost*’ (openness) inadvertently hastened the Soviet Union’s disintegration by providing greater space for critical reflection on sensitive national topics and exacerbating “already-existing tensions” between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.¹⁶⁴ Thus, in provincial cities like Kirovabad the project of building a single Soviet nation (*sovetskii narod*) was backfiring, for “as the seventies and eighties came to a close, titular ethnic groups began to develop more clearly defined ideas about themselves and their republics as protopolities—aspiring nations with a destiny that was not necessarily tied to the Soviet Union (and Russia).”¹⁶⁵ Though independence was not visible on the horizon, developments on the ground in Azerbaijan exhibited signs of a “nationalizing state” in the making as power shifted from center to periphery.¹⁶⁶ The ethnic quotas that blocked their career advancement in certain spheres may have left many Kirovabad Armenians feeling disgruntled, but they could not envision a future in which Kirovabad would cease to be a mixed city. While some Armenians relocated elsewhere in the Soviet Union in search of better

¹⁶⁴ Saparov, “Conclusion,” in *From Conflict to Autonomy*, 176.

¹⁶⁵ Arthur Tsutsiev, “1957-1990: Stability and Conflict under ‘Developed Socialism,’” in *Atlas of the Ethno-Political History of the Caucasus*, 104.

¹⁶⁶ For a detailed discussion of this concept, see Brubaker, “Nationalizing states in the old ‘New Europe’—and the new,” in *Nationalism reframed*, 79-106.

prospects—the number of Armenians in Azerbaijan steadily declined from 483,520 in 1970 to 390,505 in 1989—most remained behind and continued to lead normal lives despite the nationalizing policies in Azerbaijan.¹⁶⁷ Only a wave of violence in 1988 would depopulate the city, transforming Kirovabad into an ethnically homogeneous urban space for the first time in its history.

Conclusion: On the Eve of the Pogroms

Using the recollections of Kirovabadians themselves, this chapter has tried to uncover sources of tension while problematizing the idea that “national discontent was bubbling away throughout the Soviet period,” leading inexorably to the violence of 1988.¹⁶⁸ It has attempted to conceptualize Armenians and Azerbaijanis (and “Russians”) as “close and distant neighbors” whose lives were entangled but at times divided by mistrust and resentment.¹⁶⁹ Ultimately, the vast majority of Kirovabadians adapted to the changing political atmosphere and carried on with their lives until 1988. Though the events of that year would shatter their intimate relations, the rise of virulent nationalism immediately before, during, and after the pogroms should not distort one’s view of the prior situation. Tellingly, even when the riots began in Kirovabad, at a time when anti-Armenian rhetoric had reached its peak across Azerbaijan, most Armenian residents were caught unawares. The escalation of violence elsewhere had not destroyed the local *modus vivendi* in Kirovabad, which remained more or less intact until the first major pogrom on November 21, 1988. At the same time, it was increasingly clear that Moscow’s writ in Azerbaijan was receding under Gorbachev as national agendas took precedence over the interests

¹⁶⁷ Tsutsiev, “Appendix 3—Ethnic Composition of the Caucasus: Historical Population Statistics,” in *Atlas of the Ethno-Political History of the Caucasus*, 180.

¹⁶⁸ Smith, “Stability and national development: the Brezhnev years, 1964-1982,” in *Red Nations*, 237.

¹⁶⁹ Redlich, “Close and Distant Neighbors,” in *Together and Apart in Brzezany*, 20-33.

of the center. Local functionaries adopted a more explicitly national orientation as the traditional institutions of Soviet authority continued to erode in the face of nationalization.

Nativization policies had a cumulative effect that is crucial for understanding the violence of the late 1980s. Indigenization promoted Azerbaijanis as *primus inter pares*—as the rightful owners of a republic whose internal security was jeopardized by Armenian demands to transfer Nagorno Karabakh. Aggressive nationalism emerged not in spite of the Soviet government’s aversion to the national idea, but because the leadership implicitly recognized republics as national homelands. As Katherine Verdery astutely observed, “precisely because the Soviet regime had destroyed all *other* bases for political organization while constitutionally enshrining the *national* basis, national sentiment emerged to overwhelm federal politics.”¹⁷⁰ While state-sponsored nation building did not eliminate alternative forms of belonging—indeed, citizens continued to share a supranational allegiance to the Soviet state—it institutionalized the nation as a fundamental category, thus providing a “ready-made template” for mobilization as central authority began to disintegrate in local settings during the Gorbachev years.¹⁷¹ Even before a coherent independence movement appeared in Azerbaijan, ethnic entrepreneurs were gaining control of local institutions and redirecting the course of politics on the ground in cities across the republic as central authority evaporated. Kirovabad, like so many urban centers of the Soviet Union, was a city that ostensibly embodied the ideals of Soviet socialism for decades, but which collapsed in an utterly un-Soviet fashion in a matter of days. Just how this happened is the subject of the next chapter.

¹⁷⁰ Verdery, “Nationalism and National Sentiment in Post-socialist Romania,” 182.

¹⁷¹ Rogers Brubaker, “Nationhood and the national question in the Soviet Union and its successor states: an institutional account,” in *Nationalism reframed*, 24.

3. POGROMS IN A SOVIET CITY: THE UNMAKING OF KIROVABAD (1988-89)

“The events that elicit violence catalyze because they epitomize.”

- Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*¹⁷²

“The violence was not entirely indiscriminate,
and not entirely spontaneous.”

- Edward H. Judge, *Easter in Kishinev*¹⁷³

Everything Falls Apart

Kirovabad’s descent into chaos began, ironically, in the same archetypal “socialist space” where local residents had celebrated public holidays and lifted banners proclaiming unity and brotherhood for decades: the sprawling plaza abutting the *gorisipolkom*, or Executive Committee, building.¹⁷⁴ Over the course of several hours on November 21, 1988, a small student protest on the central Lenin Square swelled to a major demonstration in which thousands of Azerbaijanis expressed their outrage at what they perceived to be a series of Armenian transgressions across the republic. Although there were rabble-rousers among those assembled, the gathering was far from a throng of radical nationalists: managers, factory workers, professors, and prominent members of the municipal administration also attended in large numbers. Details about the content of this demonstration remain obscure, but the inflammatory anti-Armenian slogans voiced during the rally reveal that grievances revolved around the mounting tensions in Nagorno Karabakh. At some point in the afternoon, presumably once the crowds had become sufficiently agitated, approximately three to four hundred men left the

¹⁷² Donald L. Horowitz, “The Occasions for Violence,” in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, 319.

¹⁷³ Edward H. Judge, “The Causes and Legacies of the Easter Riots,” in *Easter in Kishinev: Anatomy of a Pogrom*, 138.

¹⁷⁴ David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002).

square and marched en masse toward the Armenian quarter across the river. Wandering through Armenian neighborhoods, Azerbaijani mobs issued threats, vandalized homes, defaced Armenian monuments, and beat residents who were caught in the open. The turmoil of the first day initiated an increasingly vicious cycle of violence that persisted for at least one week before dissipating into small-scale attacks, but the rupture created by the pogroms was permanent. Armenians managed to form a rudimentary self-defense network that reduced casualties and thwarted pogromists' attempts to infiltrate Armenian neighborhoods, but continued hostility eventually led to the total exodus of Kirovabad's 40-45,000 Armenians within roughly a year's time.¹⁷⁵

How an average Soviet city like Kirovabad became fragmented and depopulated is the subject of the present chapter. Taking into account the deteriorating political situation in Azerbaijan, I argue that the Kirovabad pogroms were the culmination of a chain of cascading events that brought latent tensions to a head. The near consensus among Azerbaijani residents that Armenians managed to sell their homes and leave voluntarily, while not entirely incorrect, overlooks the escalation of violence that precipitated their outmigration. Armenians were not driven out at gunpoint, nor were they subjected to organized deportations, but the pogroms created a hostile atmosphere that made their prolonged residence in Kirovabad untenable. The pogroms were neither isolated episodes of spasmodic violence, nor coordinated strikes orchestrated well beforehand. In most cases, they evolved out of emotionally charged meetings in Lenin Square where impassioned speakers and local dignitaries condoned, whether directly or indirectly, physical aggression against Armenians.¹⁷⁶ Shouts of "Karabakh is ours!," "Death to Armenians!," and "Armenians, get out of Kirovabad!" whipped up many participants into a

¹⁷⁵ For a detailed description of the pogroms on November 21, 1988, see Oganezov, "The Self-Defense of the Armenians of Kirovabad," in *The Self-Defense of the Armenians of Kirovabad, 1988-1989*, 107-115.

¹⁷⁶ For a discussion of the specific contexts and local settings in which pogroms have occurred historically, see Humphrey, "Odessa: Pogroms in a Cosmopolitan City," in *Post-Cosmopolitan Cities*, 19.

frenzy, after which enraged crowds radiated outward with little purpose other than to destroy property and inflict harm.¹⁷⁷ Despite repeated calls for the expulsion of Armenians in public gatherings, the available evidence suggests that the impetus for the pogroms was to vent collective frustration upon, intimidate, and thrash Armenians but not to murder or deport them systematically. Far from an “unstructured mêlée” of wanton destruction, pogroms quickly turned into an almost daily ritual of plundering and beating that divided the city into two nearly homogeneous halves.¹⁷⁸ The demographic and spatial transformations that accompanied the pogroms also facilitated a more intangible process of ethnonational consolidation. Above all, this chapter endeavors to show how local actors, either by committing or enduring violence, reified, manipulated, and absorbed “essentialised ethnic categories” that far outlived the pogroms themselves.¹⁷⁹

Accordingly, the following section reconstructs the pogroms as they unfolded at the street level during the first two weeks, demonstrating how violence was instrumental in polarizing residents along national lines. Drawing on memoirs, eyewitness testimonies, and articles published in the local press, it aims to uncover the processes that led to the exodus of Armenians from the city and to dissect the personal narratives surrounding these events. In addition to analyzing the pogroms themselves, it explores the ways in which Armenians and Azerbaijanis remember and make sense of the upheaval that irrevocably changed their lives and heightened their sense of belonging to a national community.

Though the pogroms did not sever communication or preclude interaction between all Armenians and Azerbaijanis, repeated attacks on Armenians—particularly those 5,000-7,000 Armenians scattered throughout the so-called “Azerbaijani section” of Kirovabad—drove them

¹⁷⁷ Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 107, 112.

¹⁷⁸ Horowitz, “Say It with Murder,” in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, 12.

¹⁷⁹ Humphrey, “Odessa: Pogroms in a Cosmopolitan City,” in *Post-Cosmopolitan Cities*, 28.

apart and solidified national differences that had been far less pronounced in earlier years.¹⁸⁰ As the previous chapter has shown, nationality was indeed a fundamental aspect of lived experience in the Soviet Caucasus, but it did not supersede all forms of self-identification until moments of severe crisis thrust nationality to the fore. The unraveling of multinational Kirovabad is thus the story of how the blurred boundaries between Armenians and Azerbaijanis hardened and became impermeable. To account for this shift, the micro-scale analysis employed in this chapter urges readers to rethink common assumptions about “ethnic conflict” by exploring the ways in which “rioters reify group boundaries and attribute characteristics to whole groups” by singling out victims based on ethnonational identity alone.¹⁸¹ This undifferentiated selection, in turn, strengthens “groupness” among those at the receiving end of violence who begin to view themselves as a bounded collectivity in opposition to a similarly bounded group of perpetrators.¹⁸² Rather than speak of ethnonational conflict, then, one might propose the inverse: that violence is the ultimate form of nation building.

The Prelude to November 1988

To understand what happened in Kirovabad, one must embed the pogroms within the context of growing unrest over the status of Nagorno Karabakh. Karabakh Armenians’ efforts to transfer the majority-Armenian enclave to Armenia in mid-February 1988 initiated a continuum of crises in Azerbaijan bookended by brutal pogroms. Within days, disputes over the future of the autonomous region fueled protests of unprecedented size in Yerevan and Baku and galvanized nascent national movements in both republics. Tensions were especially high in

¹⁸⁰ This is Haik’s estimate for the number of Armenians living on the left bank of the Ganjachai river dividing Kirovabad into two parts: the central district inhabited mostly by Azerbaijanis (left bank) and the predominately Armenian quarter (right bank). Haik, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014.

¹⁸¹ Horowitz, “Ethnic Boundaries, Riot Boundaries,” in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, 70.

¹⁸² For a nuanced analysis of how “high levels of groupness may be more the result of conflict (especially violent conflict) than its underlying cause,” see Rogers Brubaker, “Ethnicity without Groups,” in *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 19.

Sumgait, an industrial city near Baku, where outrage against perceived Armenian machinations, along with the influx of Azerbaijani refugees bearing stories of atrocities in Karabakh, provided perverse justifications for a spree of killings on February 27-29 that claimed the lives of at least thirty-two people, mostly Armenians, and led to the mass exodus of 14,000 Armenians from the city.¹⁸³ The horrific mob violence came to light only gradually, however, as the Soviet authorities struggled to contain the political fallout.

In the wake of the Sumgait massacres, Soviet mass media provided few details about the state of affairs in Azerbaijan and appeared reluctant to acknowledge the wider implications of the events. Leading periodicals gave an unclear picture of what had transpired in Nagorno Karabakh and Sumgait, and when they did draw attention to anti-Soviet behavior, they obscured the actors and downplayed the ethnonational dimension of the violence. Vague references to “hooligans” and clichéd slogans about the need to preserve the principle of the friendship of peoples dominated coverage of Azerbaijan.¹⁸⁴ Even before Sumgait, Mikhail Gorbachev’s formulaic address “to the workers and peoples of Azerbaijan and Armenia” in the newspaper *Baku Worker* on February 27, 1988 set the tone for subsequent articles about nationalist mobilization in the Caucasus. Quoting an Armenian and Azerbaijani author on friendship and using stock phrases such as “socialist internationalism—is the source of our great strength,” Gorbachev urged citizens of both republics to come to their senses and stop inflaming national passions over Nagorno Karabakh.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, in an extended *Pravda* article entitled “Emotions and Reason:

¹⁸³ See Mark R. Beissinger, “Violence and Tides of Nationalism,” in *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 297-300; De Waal, “February 199: Azerbaijan—Puzzlement and Pogroms,” in *Black Garden*, 33-37, 40-41; and Kaufman, “Karabagh and the Fears of Minorities,” in *Modern Hatreds*, 63-64.

¹⁸⁴ See Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 18.

¹⁸⁵ М. Горбачев, “Обращение Генерального секретаря ЦК КПСС М.С. Горбачева к трудящимся, к народам Азербайджана и Армении,” *Bakinskii rabochii*, February 27, 1988, 1. “Социалистический интернационализм—источник огромной нашей силы.” *Bakinsky Rabochy Azerbaidzhan Baku* [microfilm]. January thru December 1988. Reel 3. Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

On the Events in Nagorno Karabakh and Around It” published one month later, correspondents condemned the hostile scholarly disputes between Armenian and Azerbaijani historians, extolled the bravery of Azerbaijanis who saved their Armenian comrades during pogroms in Sumgait, and encouraged both groups to uphold internationalism as a guiding principle in everyday life.¹⁸⁶ A guest column entitled “Reason Must Triumph: Around Nagorno Karabakh” appeared shortly thereafter in *Literary Newspaper* and called upon Armenian and Azerbaijani intellectuals “to use their moral authority in the interest of sincere mutual understanding and good neighborliness.”¹⁸⁷ Recycling trite phrases about the age-old friendship between Soviet nations, these articles exemplified the stale language of officialdom that concealed more than it revealed.

Among the episodes overlooked in the Soviet press was the two-day pogrom that occurred in Kirovabad at the same time as Sumgait. Though far milder, the Kirovabad riots featured a large crowd of more than 200 Azerbaijani men, apparently accompanied by representatives of the local administration and the police, who proceeded to smash windows and doors along the main streets of the Armenian quarter while beating up passersby.¹⁸⁸ According to Tamar, Armenians lost electricity and telephone connections during the two days of rioting, but the compact settlement of Armenians prevented pogromists from committing atrocities like those in Sumgait where Armenians lived in separate apartment blocks.¹⁸⁹ Her testimony, though uncorroborated, points to a degree of prior planning in Kirovabad. She claims that before the pogroms there was a population census in which Armenian homes were marked with crosses on

¹⁸⁶ Ju. Arakelian et al., “Эмоции и разум: О событиях в Нагорном Карабахе и вокруг него,” *Pravda*, March 21, 1988, 3.

¹⁸⁷ “Разум должен восторжествовать: вокруг Нагорного Карабаха,” *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, March 23, 1988, 2. “[...] использовать свой моральный авторитет в интересах искреннего взаимопонимания и добрососедства.”

¹⁸⁸ Oganezov, “The Self-Defense of Armenians of Kirovabad in 1988-1989,” 95.

¹⁸⁹ Tamar, interview with author, Yerevan, Armenia, September 5, 2014.

the outer gates, while on the second day of rioting perpetrators wore sport outfits to distinguish themselves from Armenians.¹⁹⁰

Although the sudden outburst in Kirovabad resulted in no deaths, many Armenian residents noted the similarities between the attacks in Kirovabad and Sumgait and drew parallels with atrocities committed during the “Armeno-Tatar War” of 1905. Historical memories of “Turkish” barbarity gained new currency among Armenians troubled by the upsurge in violence. Reflecting on the tense atmosphere in the wake of the February pogroms, the Armenian researcher Mariam underlined how Sumgait left an indelible impression on the psyche of Armenians who feared that history might repeat itself: “...[T]hey all understood after Sumgait, in my opinion all around Azerbaijan Armenians understood that a slaughter could start like the one at the beginning of the century.”¹⁹¹ At the same time, however, Mariam indicated that the pogroms did not ruin friendships or prevent people from behaving decently: “In other words, it was clear that relations are deteriorating, but it seems to me [...] that on both sides they are still people. Individual people tried to maintain good relations.”¹⁹² These observations suggest that during the “lull” before November many Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Kirovabad continued to go about their daily lives notwithstanding the unsettling events of late February. Though disturbing for local residents, the pogroms did not dismantle established living patterns and social relations overnight. Kirovabadians harbored anxiety about the future, but there was no indication that Armenians and Azerbaijanis would separate into two irreconcilable communities.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. Western media reported that Soviet troops were active in Kirovabad following protests on February 29. See Elizabeth Fuller, “A Preliminary Chronology of Recent Events in Armenia and Azerbaijan,” Radio Liberty Research, RL 101/88, March 15, 1988, 5. Soviet Red Archives HU OSA 300-80-1 (Box 14), folder Азербайджан: геополитическая структура Баку 1963-1990.

¹⁹¹ Mariam, interview with author, Tbilisi, Georgia, August 29, 2014. “...понимали все после Сумгаита, по моему по всему Азербайджану армяне понимали, что может начинать резня начала века.”

¹⁹² Ibid. “То есть, ясно было, что сильно попортятся отношения, но мне так кажется [...] что с обеих сторон, все равно люди. Индивидуальные люди старались поддерживать хорошие отношения.”

Once the grisly details of Sumgait became public knowledge, however, the narrative of twin genocides (1915 and 1988) became a standard feature of popular discourse and a prominent theme exhibited in posters and banners during mass rallies in Yerevan.¹⁹³ Linking the perpetrators in Sumgait with the “Turks” who had annihilated Armenians in eastern Anatolia during the First World War revived memories of past suffering and fueled a growing sense of insecurity about impending bloodshed. Genocide quickly became a leitmotif of letters and petitions sent to the central authorities, as well as abroad. Members of the Karabakh Committee—an Armenian organization supporting the unification of Nagorno Karabakh with Armenia—issued an “Appeal to Humanity” to the United Nations and other international bodies that declared “for the second time in the twentieth century the Armenian people are suffering through genocide.”¹⁹⁴ Similarly, a letter addressed to Gorbachev from representatives of Moscow’s Armenian community described the Sumgait tragedy as “nothing other than an act of genocide toward the Armenian population of the Azerbaijan SSR,” adding that “extremist and terrorist actions expressed in the slaughter and pogroms of the Armenian population” were taking place in Kirovabad and elsewhere in Azerbaijan.¹⁹⁵

An impotent Soviet mass media failed to counter this narrative of genocide and continued to promote its hollow slogans that only worsened the situation. Correspondents of the Soviet television program “Pozitsiia” (Viewpoint) concluded that the conspicuous absence of reliable information in Soviet mass media about the deteriorating situation in Nagorno Karabakh exacerbated tensions between Azerbaijanis and Armenians and allowed pernicious rumors to

¹⁹³ For a visual analysis of the symbolic connection between 1915 and 1988, see Harutyun Marutyan, “The Popular Association of the Massacres in Sumgait with the Armenian Genocide,” in *The Iconography of Armenian Identity: The Memory of Genocide and the Karabagh Movement* (Yerevan: Gitutyun, 2009), 92-135.

¹⁹⁴ “Обращение к человечеству,” Yerevan, March 3, 1988. Soviet Red Archive, OSA 300-80-1 (Box 14).

¹⁹⁵ “Письмо армянской общественности Москвы М.С. Горбачеву” [A Letter of the Armenian Community in Moscow to M. S. Gorbachev], *Glasnost’: An Independent News Magazine* 17 (March 1988): 49. Soviet Red Archives, “Materialy samizdata,” HU OSA 300-80-1 (Box 14).

circulate rampantly.¹⁹⁶ Yet, at the same time, their interviews conducted across the region revealed that ordinary people residing in multiethnic communities continued to live side by side. This was also the case in Kirovabad between February and November 1988, but the status quo had been violated in a way that was not easy to repair. Despite reassurances from sympathetic local Azerbaijanis that Kirovabad would not succumb to the same indiscriminate slaughter as Sumgait, the atmosphere grew increasingly tense as television broadcasts demonized Armenians as oppressors who had prospered at the expense of Azerbaijanis, while Armenian parents, fearing for their children's safety, began to escort them to school.¹⁹⁷ The cumulative effect of these developments was the creation of a social environment conducive to dehumanization, in which neighbors and fellow citizens could be "conflated with mythical enemies," thereby threatening to escalate the violence further.¹⁹⁸

Finally, on the eve of the November pogroms, a series of what Horowitz terms "transgressive" precipitating events occurred that generated a hysterical reaction among those Azerbaijanis incensed by what they perceived as Armenian treachery in Karabakh.¹⁹⁹ In an atmosphere already rife with anti-Armenian rhetoric, these relatively minor developments pushed strained relations to the brink. These trigger episodes, in the eyes of many Azerbaijanis, represented an affront to national honor and provided further proof of Armenian injustices that could no longer be tolerated. The first incident that provoked outrage was news of an Armenian initiative to erect buildings in the Topkhana nature preserve in Karabakh near the city of Shusha—a controversial project that drew large crowds in Baku on November 17 and that many

¹⁹⁶ "Pozitsiia," 26 April, 1988. HU OSA 300-81-9-66-1; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute: Monitoring Unit: Video Recordings of Soviet and Russian Television Programs; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

¹⁹⁷ Oganezov, "Self-Defense," 99-100.

¹⁹⁸ Kaufman, "The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War," in *Modern Hatreds*, 21.

¹⁹⁹ Horowitz, "The Occasions for Violence," in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, 268. According to Horowitz, a "transgressive" precipitating event is "a blatant display of what ethnic strangers are not allowed to do with impunity."

condemned as the desecration of a valuable historical site.²⁰⁰ The response to the proposed plan was swift. In an article entitled “Topkhana is a Monument of Courage” published in the Azerbaijani periodical *Kommunist*, two professors asserted that “Shusha has been known for a long time as a symbol of the courage and heroism of the Azerbaijani people in the struggle with foreigners,” and “both Shusha and the forest of Topkhana are sacred names for our people.”²⁰¹ While the authors almost certainly exaggerated Topkhana’s historical significance, their words reinforced the perception that Armenians were trespassing and staking claims on the hallowed ground of Karabakh. The second incident, which had even more immediate consequences for Armenians living in Azerbaijan, was the decision of the Soviet Supreme Court on November 21 to sentence to death an Azerbaijani perpetrator convicted for the killings in Sumgait.²⁰² Taken together, these two controversial decisions were unacceptable for many Azerbaijanis who felt they could not permit further setbacks.²⁰³ That same day, on November 21, mass rallies across the republic—including in Kirovabad where protestors demanded the release of the “heroes” of Sumgait—caused crowds to lash out at Armenian residents seen as responsible for the recent turmoil.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Secondary sources note that the construction area was to become an aluminum works (or recreation center for laborers), while Grigorii Oganezov claims the building was meant to be a residence for Armenian refugees. See Oganezov, “The Self-Defense of Armenians in Kirovabad in 1988-1989,” 100.

²⁰¹ “Şuşa uzun illər boyu yadellilərə qarşı mübarizədə Azərbaycan xalqının rəşadət və qəhrəmanlıq rəmzi olmuşdur;” “Şuşa da, Topxana meşəsi də xalqımız üçün müqəddəs adlardır.” Şamil Cəmsidov and Fuad Əliyev, “Topxana hünər abidəsidir,” *Kommunist*, November 18, 1988, 4.

²⁰² For a brief description of both events, see Mark Saroyan, “The ‘Karabakh Syndrome’ and Azerbaijani Politics,” in *Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Edward W. Walker (Berkeley: University of California-Berkeley, 1997), 185; and Kaufman, “Karabagh and the Fears of Minorities,” in *Modern Hatreds*, 66-67.

²⁰³ A report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty confirms that Topkhana and the trial judgment precipitated the pogroms in Kirovabad. See Elizabeth Fuller, “Nagorno-Karabakh: An Ulster in the Caucasus?” Radio Liberty Research, RL 534/88, December 12, 1988, 3-4. Soviet Red Archives, HU OSA 300-80-1 (Box 14), folder Азербайджан: геополитическая структура, Нагорно Карабахская АО, 1988 (2 of 2).

²⁰⁴ Saroyan, 185; Oganezov, 101, 108.

The Anatomy of the November Pogroms

Despite the rising tensions in the days leading up to November 21, Kirovabad Armenians did not anticipate the pogroms until they were underway. Eyewitness testimony suggests that the first wave of attacks against Armenians was not a preplanned strike, but the contingent outgrowth of a protest with strong anti-Armenian overtones in the city center. The initial meetings were organized in advance, the former Armenian engineer Evgenii explained, and successfully “wound up” the crowds into a rage that paved the way for the pogroms that followed.²⁰⁵ Armenian interviewees maintained that these demonstrations occurred under the supervision of Azerbaijani officials in the local Communist Party leadership and interior ministry.²⁰⁶ During the initial attacks, groups of young Azerbaijani men engaged in largely symbolic acts of violence by targeting physical markers of Armenianness. Roaming along the main thoroughfares of the Armenian quarter, they defaced a statue dedicated to the nineteenth-century Armenian writer, Khachatur Abovian (see Figure 14), in the courtyard of an Armenian school and hurled stones through the windows of the central Armenian church, toppling and stealing the cross placed above the main entrance in the process.²⁰⁷ The local priest, Ter-Saak, who barricaded himself inside to protect the inner sanctuary, lost most of his possessions as assailants plundered his nearby home.²⁰⁸ In the city center several days later, crowds dislodged and dragged the statue of Marshal Bagramyan, a decorated Armenian general from Kirovabad who served in the Second World War, along the city’s main boulevard, Lenin Prospect.²⁰⁹ Some

²⁰⁵ Evgenii, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014. His exact words were “[...] и этими митингами первыми заводили просто людей.”

²⁰⁶ In his memoirs, Oganezov describes the first meeting in Lenin Square that he personally attended on the morning of November 21, confirming that several high-ranking, local officials were present. See Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 107-8, 112.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 109, 110, 112.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 110-11.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 134-35; see also Mark Malkasian, “Explosion,” in *Gha-ra-bagh!: The Emergence of the National Democratic Movement in Armenia* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 171.

Azerbaijanis also broke signboards bearing Armenian street names.²¹⁰ Besides ransacking apartments and brutalizing their inhabitants—a routine practice that continued for weeks—perpetrators focused much of their attention on dismantling traces of a historical Armenian presence in Kirovabad by altering the built environment.

Despite the panic spreading across the Armenian district, many residents quickly mobilized in anticipation of further violence. The initial rioting had produced the city's first fatality, Roza Melkumian, who received a lethal blow from an iron pipe that crashed through her window, and Armenian residents were determined to prevent more killings.²¹¹ Their compact settlement in the hills across from the city center enabled them to band together to fend off attacks. At the same time, being concentrated in one area left them vulnerable when gas, water, and telephone lines to Armenian apartments were cut two days later.²¹² Disconnected from the local government, which appeared to be on the side of the pogromists, Armenians relied on the assistance of Soviet troops stationed in Kirovabad. In the wake of the first series of attacks, a small group of Armenians organized an ad-hoc, self-defense organization known as the "Initiative Group" (IG), which obtained permission from the first commandant, a Russian Lieutenant-General named Poliakh, to transport beleaguered Armenians living in predominately Azerbaijani neighborhoods to the Armenian quarter. After declaring a citywide curfew on November 22, 1988, the commandant issued fifty permits for Armenians to drive through the city at night during curfew hours (22:00-6:00) and provided buses with armed guards to ferry Armenians across the city in the following days.²¹³ The evacuation of Armenians continued in full view of the local authorities, and despite the Russian commandant's reassurances that dozens

²¹⁰ Oganezov, "Self-Defense," 135.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 125.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 115-24.

of Azerbaijani perpetrators had been arrested, the municipal authorities clearly stood aside, perhaps even instigating violence through their negligence.²¹⁴

To make matters worse, the local Azerbaijani-language press sent mixed messages to residents during the first week. Upholding the curfew, a notice entitled “To the attention of the population of Kirovabad!” posted on the front page of the local newspaper *Kirovabad Communist* confirmed the restricted hours on November 24.²¹⁵ Articles in the same paper noted the persistence of demonstrations in the city square, yet even as they demanded an end to disorderly conduct, they made no mention of the fact that Armenians were targeted in riots. An address “To the City Population!” vaguely concluded that “as a result of wreckers’ intrigues-schemes, social order was broken, homes were plundered, and some people were injured.”²¹⁶ Other articles called for the restoration of order but simultaneously legitimized the protests in Kirovabad against “nationalist extremists” and “Dashnaks” in Karabakh and Armenia, stating that the “the basic demands of the mass meetings and demonstrations remain valid.”²¹⁷ In short, printed announcements were equivocal and reinforced the image of Armenians as a dangerous fifth column.

Exhortations to observe law and order did not halt the withdrawal of Armenians from central districts. As frightened Armenians flocked across the river to the Armenian quarter, the central church of Saint Grigor Lusavorich turned into the unofficial headquarters: its grounds served as the main information hub and gathering place, while an adjacent school building became a makeshift medical center tending to wounded residents who had been assaulted or

²¹⁴ Ibid., 164-65. For a discussion of how authorities’ inaction emboldens rioters, see Judge, “Pogrom!,” 52, and “The Causes and Legacy of the Easter Riots,” in *Easter in Kishinev*, 138-39.

²¹⁵ “Kirovabad şəhər əhalisinin nəzərinə!” *Kirovabad Kommunisti*, November 24, 1988, 1.

²¹⁶ S. F. Məmmədov, “Şəhər sakinlərinə,” *Kirovabad Kommunisti*, November 24, 1988, 1. “[...] ziyankarların fitnə-fəsadları nəticəsində qayda-qanun pozulmuş, evlərdə dağıntı olmuş, bəzi adamlar xəsarət almışlar.”

²¹⁷ “İctimai qayda-qanun” [Social Order], *Kirovabad Kommunisti*, November 26, 1988, 1. “Kütləvi mitinqlərin və etiraz nümayişlərin başlıca tələbləri qüvvədə qalır.”

ejected from local hospitals. Armenian residents who lived in close proximity to the church sheltered those who had fled their homes across the river, and many erected barricades in the streets to prevent mobs from winding through the district unimpeded. Though it is difficult to prove given the dearth of evidence left by perpetrators, it is plausible that such displays of solidarity and resistance actually encouraged repeated attacks against Armenians who now appeared more menacing than ever to their assailants.²¹⁸ Evgenii suggested as much when he described the prevailing view among the Azerbaijani party leadership that “this Armenian minority represents a threat to this majority, and it is necessary to defend them from Armenians. In reality, the danger was for the minority.”²¹⁹

What is clear from the rising toll of severely injured Armenians is that crowds became increasingly militant over the course of the first week. Mass rallies in Lenin Square continued unabated. According to several interviewees, Azerbaijani refugees from Armenia railed against Armenian brutality in public meetings, while violent mobs consisted largely of refugees and Azerbaijanis either from rural areas or other districts of Kirovabad.²²⁰ Stories of Armenian atrocities across the border evidently had an electrifying effect on the crowds. An Armenian eyewitness recounted how a disfigured Azerbaijani man delivered an incendiary speech calling for revenge against Armenians, even though his wounds were birth defects and not the result of mutilation.²²¹ As rioters became bolder, many Armenians received death threats in the form of

²¹⁸ Here one can only speculate as to why the attacks continued, but fear of Armenians’ organizational strength would seem to validate the theory that “the cohesion of a group can magnify the threat it poses.” See Horowitz, “Target-Group Characteristics,” in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, 172.

²¹⁹ Evgenii, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014. “это меньшинство армян представляет угрозу для этого большинства, и надо защитить их от армян. На самом деле опасность была для этого меньшинства”

²²⁰ Haik, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014; Evgenii, interview with author, Yerevan, September 4, 2014.

²²¹ See the testimony of V.A. Sarkisov in Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 357.

written ultimatums demanding that the addressees vacate their homes.²²² Personal stories and photographs (see Figures 11-13) feature Azerbaijani men armed with pipes, knives, and other makeshift weapons marauding through city streets and residential buildings in search of Armenians. Once the initial threshold of violence had been crossed, with no real consequences for the perpetrators, crowds began to hunt down individual Armenians, looting apartments and burning property with impunity.²²³ Shifting attention away from the Armenian quarter where attacks encountered resistance, pogromists redirected their fury towards isolated Armenians residing in majority-Azerbaijani areas. According to eyewitness reports, after the sudden disappearance of the city's leading local official, Azerbaijani First Secretary Bagirli, on the third day of rioting, crowds briefly seized the main government building on Lenin Square and hoisted a Turkish flag above it in symbolic defiance.²²⁴ Meanwhile, Soviet troops continued to facilitate the safe passage of Armenians by providing tanks (see Figure 15), but even soldiers were not immune to attacks. At a bridge crossing where military personnel monitored pedestrian traffic between the Azerbaijani and Armenian sectors, an Azerbaijani truck driver intentionally ran over and killed three soldiers (all Slavs).²²⁵ "Russians" also suffered collateral damage from the anti-Armenian

²²² Ibid., 152.

²²³ In his memoirs, Oganezov maintains that the "indecisive actions" of the local authorities allowed pogroms to continue. See Oganezov, "Self-Defense," 204.

²²⁴ Ibid., 7, 133.

²²⁵ See the testimony of Ivan Chugunov (footnote 110) in Oganezov, "Self-Defense," 144. Other sources indicate that a grenade thrown by an Azerbaijani killed the three soldiers on November 22. See Malkasian, "Explosion," in *Gha-ra-bagh!*, 171; also Elizabeth Fuller, "Nagorno-Karabakh: The Death and Casualty Toll to Date," Radio Liberty Research, RL 531/88, December 2, 1988, 3. Soviet Red Archives HU OSA 300-80-1 (Box 14), folder Азербайджан: геополитическая структура, Нагорно Карабахская АО, 1988 (2 of 2).



Fig. 11: Pogromists (Source: Oganezov, "Self-Defense," 188)



Fig. 12: Pogromists (Source: Oganezov, "Self-Defense," 188)



Fig. 13: Pogromists (Source: Oganezov, "Self-Defense," 114)



Fig. 14: Abovyan statue (Source: Oganezov, "Self-Defense," 109)

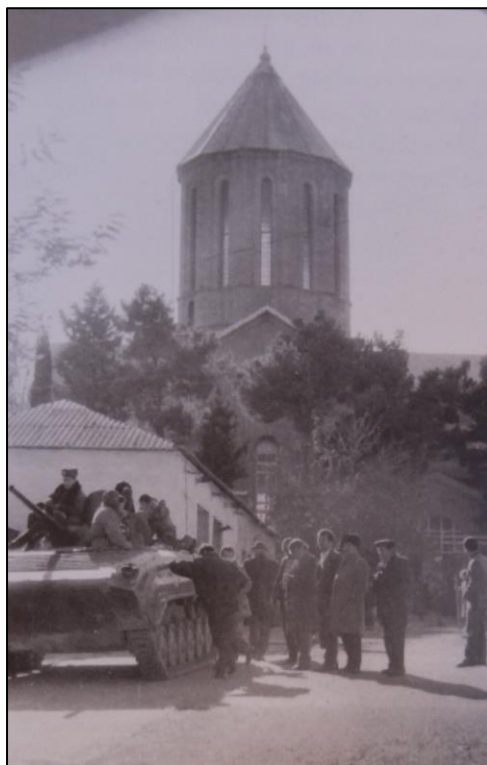


Fig. 15: Tank at the Armenian Church (Source: Oganezov, "Self-Defense," 137)

riots, but pogromists rarely targeted other nationalities aside from occasional jeers and offensive slogans.

Pogroms effectively depopulated central districts as dispossessed Armenians continued to stream toward the Armenian quarter. Many now homeless Armenians contemplated emigration, but seeking refuge across the border was not a viable option at the height of the pogroms in late November 1988 since roads leading out from Kirovabad were blocked by groups of hostile Azerbaijanis.²²⁶ As Mariam explained, Armenians faced an unfortunate dilemma in which “they could not leave and they could not stay either” amidst a severe breakdown in civil order.²²⁷ Those who attempted to fly out of Kirovabad were denied permission on numerous occasions, leaving Armenians in a hopeless situation where, “on the one hand, they [Azerbaijanis] say ‘get out of here, or we’ll kill you,’ while on the other hand they don’t allow it.”²²⁸ Though the IG established some semblance of stability in the Armenian quarter by providing food and accommodation for thousands of displaced residents, the feeling of encirclement persisted.

According to the estimates in IG records, by the end of the first week pogromists had killed ten people and seriously injured seventy-four others, pillaged 1,120 apartments, and displaced some 4,500 Armenians from their homes.²²⁹ With strangers thrust into close proximity to one another in overcrowded living spaces, tales of collective suffering at the hands of Azerbaijani mobs reinforced a greater sense of national unity among displaced Armenians. In the words of the de facto leader of the IG, Grigorii Oganezov, “the Armenian quarter was like one big family.”²³⁰ The transcripts of speeches given by traumatized residents at the Armenian church

²²⁶ Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 295.

²²⁷ Mariam, interview with author, Tbilisi, August 29, 2014. “...они и не могли уехать и не могли оставаться.”

²²⁸ Haik, group interview with author, September 2, 2014. “Они с одной стороны говорят ‘уезжаете отсюда, мы вас убьем,’ а с другой стороны не пускают.”

²²⁹ Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 8, 191.

²³⁰ Ibid., 129, 287

during this period attest to the consolidation of nationhood, as evidenced by the emotional appeals to “respected Armenian people” and “dear compatriots,” as well as exhortations such as “we, Armenians, must defend ourselves, we must fulfill the precepts of our fallen heroes.”²³¹ When a massive earthquake struck the town of Spitak in northern Armenia on December 7, killing approximately 25,000 people, Kirovabad Armenians mobilized and delivered over 8,000 rubles in relief aid and a large convoy—concerned about the fate of women and children who had been evacuated to what was now the disaster area—left Kirovabad the following day.²³² Then, almost three weeks after the start of the pogroms and in the midst of mass out-migration, local Armenians sent a letter addressed to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet and thirteen other Soviet republics, describing their dire predicament in Kirovabad and declaring that nothing less than deportation and genocide were underway.²³³

Tellingly, however, the Soviet government’s inept response to the pogroms had not undermined completely local Armenians’ faith in its ability to dispense justice, at least not at this early stage. Though the pogroms had shattered the notion that Armenians and Azerbaijanis were “brotherly” nations who could coexist peacefully, Armenians anticipated an imminent reckoning for Azerbaijani perpetrators. According to Evgenii, Armenians sincerely believed that the punitive power of the state would rescue them from their miserable plight, especially since Armenians themselves had compiled incriminating evidence. “People still hoped, no one planned to leave, they hoped that all of the documents would be presented to the Soviet prosecutor’s office, to the Soviet authorities, and they will punish the culprits.”²³⁴ Evgenii reiterated that

²³¹ See *Ibid.*, 145-53, especially 148.

²³² *Ibid.*, 298-300. For more on the earthquake, see De Waal, “1988-89: An Armenian Crisis,” in *Black Garden*, 65-66; and Malkasian, “Earthquake,” in *Gha-ra-bagh!*, 180-88.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 313-318.

²³⁴ Evgenii, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014. “Люди еще надеелись, никто уезжать не собирався, надеелись, что эти все документы будут представлены советской прокуратуре, советским властям, и они накажут виновников.”

Armenians expected the government to intervene to restore order, for “at that time, something was preserved, still some kind of hope for the protection of the Soviet authorities. The hope that this could not be so, that tomorrow it will end.”²³⁵ It is a testament to their enduring self-identification as Soviet citizens that Armenians continued to appeal to state institutions to guarantee their security even as these institutions failed to act decisively. At some point, official investigators arrived from Moscow to assess the extent of the damage in Kirovabad, but there was little accountability for the pogroms at the local level during this period.²³⁶

Relations between the Initiative Group and the local authorities became strained as Armenians realized the futility of staying in Kirovabad. The commandant’s office expressed serious reservations about the autonomous self-defense organization and pressured Armenians to remove barricades from their streets. Eventually, Grigorii Oganezov himself was accused, falsely, of having close ties to the Karabakh Committee in Armenia.²³⁷ A prominent member of the Initiative Group sharply criticized the third secretary of Kirovabad’s Executive Committee, an Armenian woman, for her failure to intervene on behalf of the besieged Armenian community.²³⁸ The pogroms gradually dissipated in December—and the Initiative Group dissolved on December 14—but the recurrent violence induced the vast majority of Armenians to flee Kirovabad permanently, while the residual population encountered sporadic attacks until August 1989.²³⁹

In the end, despite the Soviet garrison’s attempts to protect the Armenians and restore order in the first days, inter-communal relations rapidly deteriorated to the point where living

²³⁵ Evgenii, interview with author, Yerevan, September 4, 2014. “Тогда еще что-то сохранилось, еще какая-то надежда на защищенность от советских властей. Надежда на то, что этого не может быть, это завтра кончится.”

²³⁶ Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 193.

²³⁷ Ibid., 334.

²³⁸ Ibid., 309-10.

²³⁹ Ibid., 204.

together was no longer conceivable.²⁴⁰ Whether due to fear, shock, or quiet endorsement, most Azerbaijani city dwellers did not intervene in any meaningful way to halt the downward spiral of violence—many, in fact, perpetuated it by attending rallies and joining roving gangs as they pilfered Armenian homes. It is safe to assume that the vilification of Armenians and pogroms against them enjoyed a measure of popular “legitimacy and social support” even if that support was not readily apparent.²⁴¹ The consensus among Armenians regarding Azerbaijanis was that “the general mass, if it did not participate in the pogroms directly, either encouraged the aggressors, or abstained in a cowardly manner.”²⁴² Although the number of perpetrators constituted a small fraction of the city’s population, aggressive, public manifestations of Azerbaijani chauvinism and physical attacks—coupled with the fact that prominent local authorities had aided and abetted violence by not interfering—convinced Kirovabad Armenians that resettlement in Armenia or elsewhere in the Soviet Union was unavoidable. The local administration’s failure to deter crowds from terrorizing fellow citizens points to its tacit approval of the pogroms, or its inability to challenge the rising tide of nationalism. Its impotency lifted constraints on crowd behavior, lending support to the argument that “the approval or disinterest signaled by authorities can unleash hostility previously well hidden from view.”²⁴³ The exact role of ethnic entrepreneurs, especially municipal bureaucrats who were present at mass meetings in Lenin Square, remains obscure, but one can deduce from the available evidence that many Azerbaijani officials must have incited and sanctioned violence against local Armenians who were clearly the focal point of collective anger.²⁴⁴ Regardless of their actions, which remain

²⁴⁰ Kaufman, “Karabagh and the Fears of Minorities,” in *Modern Hatreds*, 77.

²⁴¹ Horowitz, “Organizers and Participants,” in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, 266.

²⁴² Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 277.

²⁴³ Horowitz, “The Social Environment for Killing,” in *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, 359.

²⁴⁴ As Oganezov claims, “the pogroms were not the work of criminal elements, they were practically sanctioned by the chief, multilevel party leaders.” See Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 337. For a discussion of the “ambiguous and

unknown, the mere presence of local authorities at rallies condoned the mistreatment of Armenians, prompting crowds to take matters into their own hands.²⁴⁵

Many perpetrators certainly acted of their own volition, but encouragement and coercion also motivated otherwise passive bystanders to take part in the pogroms. Young people were particularly susceptible to incitement by elders. An Azerbaijani university student named Vagif detained near the Armenian church confirmed that professors had goaded them on by reassuring them that there would be no repercussions for their actions. According to his testimony, professors would prod them into rioting, saying “boys, don’t worry, do what you can, the entire Azerbaijani nation is with you,” and “don’t fear anything, no one can take Karabakh away from us [...] don’t be ashamed of anything, just as they treat our Azerbaijani lads in Armenia, so must you treat them as well, the people are with you, the police is with you.”²⁴⁶ Though it is difficult to gauge the extent to which teachers organized or supported pogroms, the high representation of students in crowds suggests that academic institutions were important sites of mobilization. Some students were under serious pressure to commit acts of violence, as illustrated by the case of Nina’s Azerbaijani neighbor’s two sons. When Nina’s other neighbors asked why they had participated in pogroms while their father offered to protect Armenians, the sons replied that they were compelled to join the rampaging crowds lest they face expulsion from their universities.²⁴⁷

even in some cases sympathetic role” of local officials in Sumgait, see Beissinger, “Violence and Tides of Nationalism,” in *Nationalist Mobilization*, 299-300.

²⁴⁵ One should not see these functionaries as puppet masters orchestrating events behind the scenes, but rather as officials whose inaction removed popular inhibitions about using physical force against Armenians. For a gruesome example of authority figures setting the stage for popular participation in anti-Jewish pogroms, see John-Paul Himka, “The Lviv Pogrom of 1941: The Germans, Ukrainian Nationalists, and the Carnival Crowd,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue canadienne des slavistes* 53.2-4 (2011): 209-43.

²⁴⁶ See the testimony of Vagif Kurbanov in Oganezov, 196. “...ребята, не бойтесь, делайте, что можете, весь азербайджанский народ с вами;” “...ничего не бойтесь, никто Карабах у нас не сможет отнять [...] ничего не стесняйтесь, как они в Армении поступают с нашими ребятами-азербайджанцами, так и вы должны поступать с ними, народ с вами, милиция с вами.”

²⁴⁷ Nina, interview with author, Yerevan, September 6, 2014.

In addition to recognizing the agency of students who willingly participated, then, one must also acknowledge the disciplinary structures that conditioned their behavior.

Compassionate Interventions

Kirovabad's implosion is not simply the story of one ethnic group turning on the other out of some primordial hatred. Just as many Azerbaijanis stood aside or quietly supported the pogroms, so too did others put themselves in harm's way to protect Armenian friends and coworkers. Oksana, an eight or nine-year-old girl at the time, remembered that while some Azerbaijanis identified which apartments belonged to Armenians, others deliberately lied to conceal their Armenian neighbors from intruders.²⁴⁸ Evgenii noted that there were instances when Azerbaijanis came to the defense of Armenian neighbors, but "this was very dangerous for them as well. Even more dangerous for them" given the uncompromising stance of the crowds.²⁴⁹ Tigran, who lived with his family in the very center of Kirovabad next to Lenin Square, recalled how an Azerbaijani neighbor initially hid Tigran's family when the pogroms began, but as the situation deteriorated his friend became increasingly concerned about the safety of his own family and the potential consequences for sheltering Armenians.²⁵⁰

In *The Self-Defense of the Armenians of Kirovabad in 1988-89*, Grigorii Oganezov mentions specific individuals (and others who asked to remain anonymous) who risked their reputations and perhaps even their lives by preventing attacks, transporting Armenians to safety, and providing medical treatment.²⁵¹ Nina recalled how her Azerbaijani neighbor objected to the construction of barricades in the streets of the Armenian quarter but personally offered to shoot

²⁴⁸ Oksana, interview with author, Baku, August 21, 2014.

²⁴⁹ Evgenii, interview with author, Yerevan, September 4, 2014. "Это было очень опасно и для них. Еще опаснее для них."

²⁵⁰ Tigran, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014.

²⁵¹ Oganezov, "Self-Defense," 277, 280.

any Azerbaijani trespassers with his own rifle instead.²⁵² Once the pogroms began, Tamar's neighbor, a ninety-year-old Azerbaijani woman, proposed that she would sleep in front of Tamar's bedroom at night to turn intruders away and protect her children.²⁵³ Another Azerbaijani woman and her nephew brought Tamar groceries from the local bazaar across the river, and one night when they passed Tamar's house to find her gate locked, the nephew apologized for the tense atmosphere that had led Tamar to shut her courtyard in the evening.²⁵⁴ The mass participation of Azerbaijanis in public demonstrations and pogroms has overshadowed these individual acts of kindness and solidarity, but these few examples illustrate how a middle ground existed where residents continued to uphold neighborly relations.

Kirovabad was not unique in this respect. In some cases, even those Armenians and Azerbaijanis who were not neighbors devised practical solutions when forced to leave their communities behind. As tensions escalated across the region in 1988-89, Armenian residents in the village of Kerkenj in Azerbaijan and Azerbaijani villagers of Kyzyl-Shafag in Armenia agreed to exchange their villages and guard their respective cemeteries indefinitely.²⁵⁵ Residents of both villages perceived themselves as vulnerable minorities whose lives were in jeopardy, yet they were reluctant to abandon their homes without making special arrangements with new residents. Although their relocation to their respective titular republics accelerated the ethnic homogenization of Armenia and Azerbaijan, their compromise illustrates how meaningful dialogue took place even in such difficult circumstances. In some cases, Armenians who remained in Kirovabad in 1989 also managed to sell their houses by negotiating with Azerbaijanis, but the terms of exchange were far less favorable and the discussions less

²⁵² Nina, interview with author, Yerevan, September 6, 2014.

²⁵³ Tamar, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Sevil Huseynova, et al., *Beyond the Karabakh Conflict: The Story of Village Exchange*, eds. Nino Lejava, et al. (Tbilisi: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2012).

cordial.²⁵⁶ Given the trauma of the pogroms and the deep mistrust between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, the idea that departing Armenians might return one day to Kirovabad was a dim prospect indeed.

Aftermath: The Unraveling of the “Friendship of Peoples”

The Kirovabad pogroms marked the beginning of a prolonged period of mass migration, displacement, and brutal warfare between Armenia and Azerbaijan that would end only in 1994 with a tenuous ceasefire. Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, between 1988 and 1990, nearly 260,000 Armenians fled from Azerbaijan, while 200,000 Azerbaijanis living in Armenia sought refuge in Azerbaijan.²⁵⁷ It is difficult to characterize these population movements that were, strictly speaking, neither forced deportations, nor voluntary relocations. Evgenii, who left Kirovabad with his children and a handful of books in April 1989 after the violence had subsided, rejected the idea that moving to Armenia was the fulfillment of some dream: “No one left voluntarily, neither Azerbaijanis from here, not Armenians from there [...] Of course, I made the decision to leave. The decision to leave was mine. But my continued presence there was a threat to my family and my life.”²⁵⁸ Haik added that Armenians who wished to purchase airplane tickets or exchange their apartments were required to declare that they were leaving not under coercion, but of their own free will.²⁵⁹ Armenians clearly felt they had been expelled by force, but the local authorities evidently wished to conceal the reasons for their departure.

Although few Armenians lost their lives during the pogroms in Kirovabad, the impetus for refugees to memorialize their plight was strong. On November 20, 1989, almost exactly one

²⁵⁶ Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 342, 346.

²⁵⁷ Arthur Tsutsiev, “1989-1991: Overview of the Ethnopolitical Rivalries at the Conclusion of the Soviet Era,” in *Atlas of the Ethno-Political History of the Caucasus*, 113.

²⁵⁸ Evgenii, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014. “Никто добровольно не уезжал, и ни отсюда азербайджанцы ни оттуда армяне [...] Конечно, я принял решение уехать. Решение уезжать я принял. Но дальнейшее мое пребывание там, это была угроза моей семье и моей жизни.”

²⁵⁹ Haik, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014; see also Oganezov, “Self-Defense,” 288.

year since the beginning of the pogroms, members of the Initiative Group installed an Armenian stone cross (*khachkar*) next to the Armenian genocide memorial on Tsitsernakaberd, a hill overlooking Yerevan. The decision to place the monument in the vicinity of the ultimate emblem of Armenian nationhood was no doubt intentional. Indeed, the cross, dedicated to victims from Kirovabad and settlements in the surrounding region, evokes continuity in collective suffering from 1915 to 1988 given its proximity to the complex commemorating the mass deportation and killing of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Clearly, the cross does not challenge the primacy of the “Great Catastrophe” of 1915 in the master narrative of Armenian martyrdom, but the juxtaposition of the memorials nevertheless reinforces the idea that the Kirovabad pogroms were a tragedy tantamount to a second genocide. A similar ritual of mourning enhances the *khachkar*’s symbolic resonance: just as thousands of Armenians participate in annual processions to the genocide memorial on April 24, so too do Armenians from Kirovabad ascend the same hill on the last Sunday in November every year to pay homage to the world they lost.²⁶⁰ This solemn ceremony helped to instill a sense of unity among Kirovabad Armenians, bringing them closer together as a community of refugees than they had been before as residents of Kirovabad.

Meanwhile, interstate war catalyzed the process of estrangement between Armenians and Azerbaijanis that had begun with the exodus of Armenians from Kirovabad. As the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh intensified in the early 1990s, enemy images crystallized to the point where violence transformed even close friends into imagined foes. In 1992, after Tamar discovered that her relatives had been murdered in the Mardakert region of Nagorno Karabakh, her Azerbaijani friend Dilara phoned from Moscow. Reflecting on their brief conversation over two decades later, Tamar recalled how she herself, traumatized and stricken with grief, could not summon up the strength to speak to Dilara. Despite their intimate history, the strain of war had taken its toll

²⁶⁰ Oganezov, 348-49.

on their friendship: “At that moment, you know, it seemed that Dilara had killed my aunt and uncle. You will forgive me, and I also beg your pardon that I thought that way, but the pain was so deep and intense that I could not speak with her. I said ‘I will call you back, Dilara,’ but after that I never called her. That was our last call.”²⁶¹ At this juncture, Dilara appeared not as a dear friend, but as the representative of a hostile nation that had butchered Tamar’s family members. Though she later disassociated Dilara from the Azerbaijani majority, Tamar noted an irrevocable transformation in personal relations between Armenians and Azerbaijanis: “In general, there were good friends but they became enemies.”²⁶² In the end, war had aggregated known and unknown Azerbaijanis—friends, acquaintances, pogromists, and tens of thousands of bystanders—into one indistinguishable mass.

Among the lasting consequences of the Kirovabad pogroms visible today is the phenomenon that Horowitz terms “deindividuation” in which abstract categories replace concrete individuals as a result of violent confrontations. Even as some Armenians acknowledged the good deeds and redeeming qualities of particular Azerbaijanis, they tended to speak of them as a homogeneous group of perpetrators. The passage of time, as well as the lingering trauma of the ordeal, seems to have led some respondents to attribute immutable features to the “other.” Armenian respondents frequently referred to the belligerent nature of the “Turks,” thus collapsing Azerbaijanis into the same category as the Turks to the west of Armenia. Though emphatic that not all Azerbaijanis behaved barbarously, Tigran nevertheless stressed that the vast majority acted out of primal, nomadic instincts during the pogroms—rioting, stealing, and killing without thinking. Despite seventy years of Soviet education, the civilizing mission had failed to

²⁶¹ Tamar, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. “В этот момент, вы знаете как, мне так показалось, что мою тетю и дядю убила Дилара. Вы меня извините, и я сейчас прошу за это извинение, что я так думала, но боль был [sic] так настолько глубоко и сильно, что я не смогла с ней говорить. Я сказала ‘я перезвоню себе Дилара,’ но после этого я ей не звонила. Наш этот последний звонок.”

²⁶² Ibid. “В общем, были хорошие друзья но стали врагами.”

eliminate what he described as tribal backwardness in Azerbaijan: “They told them ‘you must be civilized,’ but it turned that out that it’s simply impossible. Just when they told them you may do as you wish he became this savage. They conducted themselves, even now they behave wildly. Just wildly.”²⁶³ Tigran qualified his remarks by stating that some Azerbaijanis had left Kirovabad because they found the violence deplorable, but his testimony largely conformed to familiar tropes of Turkish brutality embedded in Armenian popular discourse.

Other respondents adhered to essentialized images of the “Turk” that have hardened since the Karabakh ceasefire in 1994. Tamar, visibly shaken as she recounted her story, declared, “we lost everything. What had been built over years, decades we lost it all. The Turks, you know, they were accustomed to living at the expense of other Armenians, at the expense of Armenians. They pillaged, destroyed, [...] mocked.”²⁶⁴ Aggression emerges here as a supposedly innate characteristic of Azerbaijanis; a primeval force that, when unleashed, spelled disaster for Armenians. Yet this rage was not uncontrolled: in their narratives, Armenians spoke not of random acts of violence but of a campaign of calculated destruction and ethnic cleansing organized from above. When asked to comment on the identity of the pogromists, Tamar answered that it was not simply young hooligans who were to blame, but the faculty and staff at various institutes who allegedly oversaw the rioting. In Tamar’s mind, there was little doubt as to the underlying objective of the pogroms: “It was very meticulously, thoroughly prepared. It was generally a war against Armenians. So that not a single Armenian was left.”²⁶⁵ One could interpret this statement as a retrospective conclusion formed after years of war had depopulated

²⁶³ Tigran, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. “Сказали ‘вы должны быть цивилизованным,’ а оказалось, что это так просто не получается. Так только им сказали, что можно делать, что хочешь он стал вот этим дикарем. Они вели себя, они сейчас себя ведут дико. Ну просто дико.”

²⁶⁴ Tamar, interview with author, Yerevan, September 5, 2014. “Потеряли все. То что было создано годами, десятилетиями, мы все потеряли. А турки всегда, вы знаете, они привыкли жить за богатство других армян, за богатство армян. Грабили, уничтожали, [...] издевались.”

²⁶⁵ Ibid. “Это было очень тщательно хорошенько подготовлено. Это вообще война против армян. Чтобы ни одного армянина не был.”

Azerbaijan of Armenians, but the fear that Kirovabad Armenians were on the verge of annihilation was also prevalent at the time.

Azerbaijani Counter Narratives

While Armenians were convinced that they were subjected to forced migration, Azerbaijani respondents described the outflow of Armenians as a voluntary and peaceful process. Their almost complete unanimity attests to the strength of state narratives that deny Azerbaijani wrongdoing vis-à-vis Armenians. The retired nurse Firuzə rejected the suggestion that disturbances had taken place in Kirovabad. Her response dovetailed with the statements of other local residents regarding Armenians' exodus from the city: "Not a single person bothered anyone."²⁶⁶ In contrast to Azerbaijani refugees fleeing from Armenia, the retired mathematics teacher Aynur insisted that Armenians did not leave Baku in a panic. "I am telling you once more. They calmly sold their apartment, received good money, gathered all their belongings, and left quietly. That's it."²⁶⁷ Azerbaijanis even facilitated their departure, she added, by escorting Armenians to trains and ships that would conduct them safely to destinations beyond the borders of Azerbaijan.²⁶⁸ Likewise, in Kirovabad, the schoolteacher Sevinc discussed how Azerbaijanis personally transported Armenians to border crossings.²⁶⁹ When the situation in Kirovabad became unbearable for her Armenian colleague, the Azerbaijani accountant Gülarə said she escorted her to the airport, stressing that many Azerbaijanis helped Armenian friends in a similar fashion.²⁷⁰ Aynur and Sevinc both noted how the overwhelming majority of Armenians in both Kirovabad and Baku expressed little desire to leave behind the lives they had built in Azerbaijan.

²⁶⁶ Firuzə, interview with author, Ganja, August 17, 2014. "Ни одной человек не трогал никому [sic]."

²⁶⁷ Aynur, interview with author, Baku, August 24, 2014. "Я говорю тебе еще раз. Они здесь спокойно свою квартиру продали, хорошие деньги получили, все вещи свои собрали, и уехали спокойно. Все."

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Sevinc, unrecorded interview with author, Ganja, August 9, 2014.

²⁷⁰ Gülarə, interview with author, Ganja, August 7, 2014.

According to Sevinc, many Armenians wished to remain in Kirovabad because their ethnic brethren across the border looked down on them as “Turks” who were not welcome in Armenia.²⁷¹ There is, of course, an element of truth to these statements, but they disguise the reasons why Armenians left in the first place. Even as they highlighted how humanely Azerbaijanis treated their Armenian friends, interviewees were not inclined to recognize Azerbaijani culpability for their misfortune.

In Azerbaijani testimonies, Armenians frequently appear as conspirators who prepared for conflict well in advance. As early as 1983, Firuzə argued, Armenians began contributing money to a secret fund, but the purpose was unclear at that time.²⁷² Sevinc maintained that Armenians collected money for separate Armenian classes, as well as donations for the future war effort.²⁷³ Aynur explained that some Armenians sent money, either monthly or annually, to the Armenian political party Dashnaktsutun as a kind of insurance policy. Even Rüstəm, who had scoffed at the idea that Armenians might betray Azerbaijanis when he was younger, gradually realized the extent of their treachery:

So in the very end we understand that they have some plot against us. They have some conspiracy. So don't think that I am schizophrenic or paranoic, but soon we understand that all of them collect money for Karabakh war. All this period. Many of Armenians secretly from their monthly wages give money to some Karabakh foundation. Secret one. [...] middle class and very rich Armenians, they always send money to this Karabakh foundation for ‘anschluss,’ let's say. But we were blind, we didn't know that. This is only after Karabakh, when Karabakh started so many things became known.²⁷⁴

Yet even as Rüstəm highlighted what he regarded as an irreparable breach of trust, he acknowledged that Armenians had not left Baku and other cities of their own volition. He conceded that their situation became increasingly precarious as Azerbaijani refugees poured in

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Firuzə, interview with author, Ganja, August 17, 2014.

²⁷³ Sevinc, unrecorded interview with author, Ganja, August 9, 2014.

²⁷⁴ Rüstəm, interview with author, Baku, August 26, 2014. Interview conducted in English.

from Armenia—dispossessed, embittered, and eager to retaliate, as they did in Sumgait. What these testimonies illustrate is that outlandish conspiracy theories continue to circulate widely in a society where propagandistic narratives maintain a monopoly on public discourse. Azerbaijani respondents often spoke well of Armenians, but when the sensitive issue of the Karabakh conflict arose, their statements largely conformed to a well-rehearsed script.

Indeed, just as Armenians pointed to a continuity in “Turkish” aggression from 1905 to 1915 to 1988, so too did Azerbaijanis speak of Armenian atrocities from a long-term perspective. For Aynur, the ongoing war over Nagorno Karabakh represents a continuation of the infamous “March Events” of 1918 when Bolshevik and Dashnak troops massacred scores of Muslims in Baku. “This conflict has not ended, the conflict of 1918 has not ended,” she said, positing a direct connection between past and present violence.²⁷⁵ “To seize Azerbaijani lands was always in their soul. It is not a question of today. It is not a question of twenty years. It is 1918 when there was a war between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.”²⁷⁶ In Aynur’s mind, the nefarious deeds of mythical “Dashnaks” took center stage, while the Soviet interlude of 70 years receded into the background. When the conflagration over Karabakh reached the point of no return in 1990, Aynur explained, “the hatred they [Armenians] had in their soul” became clear.²⁷⁷ Echoing a familiar refrain about Azerbaijan being unprepared for war, Gülarə insisted, “we did not know that there would be an Armenian-Muslim conflict.”²⁷⁸ She indicated that Gorbachev’s policies drove a wedge between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, but whereas Armenians acted aggressively,

²⁷⁵ Aynur, interview with author, Baku, August 24, 2014. “Этот конфликт не кончался. 1918-ого года этот конфликт не кончался.”

²⁷⁶ Ibid. “У них в душе всегда было захватить азербайджанские земли. Это не сегодняшний вопрос. Это не двадцатилетний вопрос. Это 1918 когда между армянами азербайджанцами была война.”

²⁷⁷ Ibid. “У них в душе была ненависть.”

²⁷⁸ Gülarə, interview with author, Ganja, August 7, 2014. “Biz bilmədik erməni müsəlman dalğası olacaq.”

Azerbaijanis remained tolerant. In the end, these two testimonies reveal the persistence of categories that cast Armenians and Azerbaijanis as homogeneous blocs acting in unison.

The incompatible perspectives outlined above reflect memory cultures that have matured in isolation since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Perhaps the ultimate legacy of the pogroms and subsequent war is the inability of many Armenians and Azerbaijanis to empathize with each other's experiences of hardship. Today, Kirovabad's troubled past remains submerged beneath the shifting landscape of a city eager to reclaim its Azerbaijani heritage. Memory of the city's Armenian population continues to fade as residents of present-day Ganja embark on the nationalization of urban space. Turning to the narratives embedded in public monuments, museums, and also textbooks, the following chapter will explore the (re)construction of Azerbaijani history and national identity in the city.

4. FROM KIROVABAD TO GANJA: POSTWAR NATION BUILDING AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

“War is a myth-creating experience in the life of every society.”
- Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors*²⁷⁹

“Wherever one goes, in each country people will boast
about how far their ancestors had once reached.”
- Ryszard Kapuściński, *Imperium*²⁸⁰

Politicization of the Past

Although an official ceasefire ended outright war over the contested enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1994, Armenia and Azerbaijan remain on the battlefield in both a literal and a figurative sense. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a proliferation of militant historical works and commemorative events in Armenia and Azerbaijan has nurtured the growth of antagonistic narratives that stress national suffering and victimization at the hands of the “other” across the border. Ritualized mourning and official commemorations of past atrocities have become routine features of public life, as evidenced by annual processions to the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan on April 24 and somber ceremonies honoring Azerbaijani civilians massacred by Armenian forces in the town of Khojaly on February 26 (1992). In an effort to rally support for its cause, the Azerbaijani government declared March 31 a Day of Genocide in 1998 and has lobbied tirelessly ever since to convince foreign governments that Khojaly represents “one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the Azerbaijani nation.”²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Jan T. Gross, “Is It Possible to be Simultaneously a Victim and a Victimizer?” in *Neighbors*, 143.

²⁸⁰ Ryszard Kapuściński, *Imperium*, trans. Klara Glowczewska (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 56.

²⁸¹ Evgeny Finkel, “In Search of Lost Genocide: Historical Policy and International Politics in Post-1989 Eastern Europe,” *Global Society* 24.1 (January 2010): 58. As one Azerbaijani textbook categorically states, “this tragedy represents one of the most terrible crimes committed against mankind in the twentieth century.” See Tair Kaffarov, et al., *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana 11 [History of Azerbaijan 11]*, trans. A.A. Godzhaev and R.I. Rizaev (Baku: Çarşıoğlu, 2009), 171.

Rather than merely paying tribute to the victims, deploying “genocide” in this case seems designed to provide “the state with internal and external legitimacy” through popular mobilization and international sympathy.²⁸² Meanwhile, the triumphant 2012 return to Azerbaijan of a convicted murderer, Ramil Safarov—an Azerbaijani lieutenant who killed his Armenian colleague, Guren Margarian, during a NATO training course in Budapest in 2004—turned both men into “national icons” in their respective countries.²⁸³ The politicization of history and memory, in other words, continue to drive Armenians and Azerbaijanis further apart.

Rooting this discussion in postwar Ganja, this chapter examines nation-building processes as reflected through spatial transformations and the exhibition of history in public spaces, as well as in a widely used history textbook. Unfortunately, oral history interviews provided scant details about developments in Ganja since independence, but visual and textual analyses seek to compensate for this gap. Above all, the following pages illustrate how years of conflict have changed irrevocably the urban environment and narratives about the city’s, as well as Azerbaijan’s, past. As will become clear, Ganja represents a microcosm of larger trends in nationalization that have developed in Azerbaijan since 1994.

Reclaiming Space, Rewriting History

Among the many monuments built in Ganja to commemorate Azerbaijan’s troubled past, one particularly noteworthy site is the “Martyrs’ Alley” memorial to victims of the Soviet military’s intervention in Baku on January 20, 1990.²⁸⁴ Modeled after the larger complex and cemetery in Baku perched on a hill overlooking the Caspian Sea, Ganja’s memorial is the

²⁸² Finkel, “In Search of Lost Genocide,” 53.

²⁸³ De Waal, “2001-2012: Deadlock and Estrangement,” in *Black Garden*, 303.

²⁸⁴ F. Tanrıverdiev, “Гянджинцы чтут память шехидов” [Residents of Ganja Honor the Memory of Martyrs], *Новости Гянджи* [*Novosti Giandzhi*], January 17-31, 2015, 2, last accessed June 7, 2015, http://www.novostigyandji.com/?page_id=18.

gathering place for annual ceremonies paying tribute to the memory of “glorious fighters for the Homeland, for its freedom and independence.”²⁸⁵ This anniversary, immortalized in collective memory as “Black January” (*Qara Yanvar*), commemorates the over one hundred Azerbaijani civilians killed by Soviet troops when a state of emergency was declared in Baku on January 20, 1990 following a series of anti-Armenian pogroms.²⁸⁶ This tragic episode now forms a cornerstone of national mythology as the point when Azerbaijan’s secession from the Soviet Union became inevitable. To highlight the significance of this historic moment, one of Baku’s busiest metro stations was renamed “20 January” (*İyirmi Yanvar*), street names were changed in towns across the country, and newspapers portrayed the Soviet crackdown as clear evidence of Mikhail Gorbachev’s anti-Azerbaijani orientation. Just four days after the intervention, an article entitled “An Appeal to the Youth of the Country and the World” printed in the newspaper *Vestnik Giandzhi* (*Ganja Herald*) condemned the state of emergency as “a crime against the Soviet people, an act of military aggression against Azerbaijan.”²⁸⁷ Today, “Martyrs’ Alley” has become a focal point of collective memory—a physical representation of triumph through suffering—which has prompted the construction of similar monuments across the country glorifying fallen heroes and venerating the guarantors of Azerbaijan’s independence.

As in Baku, public spaces in Ganja have undergone symbolic transformations since independence. Exchanging one virtuous leader for another, local authorities have removed the main city square’s Lenin monument and installed a statue of former president Heydar Aliyev

²⁸⁵ Ibid. “...имена славных борцов за Родину, за ее свободу и независимость.”

²⁸⁶ For a brief description of the Soviet intervention in Baku, see Stephen Kotkin, “The Drama of Reform,” in *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 83. While Kotkin places the death toll at approximately 200, Jeremy Smith estimates that more than 120 people were killed. See Smith, “From reform to dissolution, 1982-1991,” in *Red Nations*, 269.

²⁸⁷ “Обращение ко всей молодежи страны и мира,” *Vestnik Giandzhi*, January 24, 1990, 2. HU OSA 300-85-18 (Box 189), Russian regional press. The exact wording was: “Это решение является преступлением против советского народа, актом военной агрессии против Азербайджана.” Audrey Altstadt notes that this particular periodical was especially “vitriolic in criticism of the AzCP and republican and central governments” at the time. See Altstadt, “Appendix: Unofficial and Opposition Publications, 1988-1991,” in *The Azerbaijani Turks*, 230.

(1993-2003) flanked by a memorial center. No longer the gathering place for orchestrated celebrations of socialist holidays, the plaza now functions as a venue for patriotic folk concerts and annual flower-laying ceremonies on the anniversary of Aliyev's death (see Figure 16).



Fig. 16: Heydar Aliyev statue and memorial museum (author's photo, December 2012)

Further from the central square, a giant flagpole and sprawling park complex (reportedly the largest in the South Caucasus) on the city's outskirts stand as testaments to Azerbaijan's immense resource wealth as well as to the authoritarian political dynasty established by Aliyev.²⁸⁸ Massive billboards featuring Heydar and his son, Ilham, the current president, have replaced formulaic signs emblazoned with Marxist-Leninist propaganda and depictions of toiling laborers. In the entrance hall of one public university, portraits of the two presidents greet students with inspirational slogans such as "education is the nation's future," "Azerbaijan's state sovereignty is stable, indestructible, and eternal," and "Heydar is the people—the people is Heydar."²⁸⁹ Paradoxically, while the sacralization of the state and its father figures has supplanted

²⁸⁸ For a thought-provoking discussion of the flurry of new architectural projects in Azerbaijan's capital, see Bruce Grant, "The Edifice Complex: Architecture and the Political Life of Surplus in the New Baku," *Public Culture* 26.3 (2014): 501-28.

²⁸⁹ Interestingly, the former engineer Evgenii (Armenian) specifically mentioned these giant banners of Azerbaijan's leaders as a key difference in the political cultures of Armenia and Azerbaijan. In Armenia, he contended, such

Soviet ideology, the various manifestations of state glorification retain a remarkably Soviet ethos. Since his death, Aliyev's ever-evolving cult of personality has catapulted him from the humble First Secretary of Soviet Azerbaijan to the patriotic visionary who continues to lead the nation from beyond the grave.

Amidst these new architectural and rhetorical assertions of power, however, one encounters lingering remnants of Ganja's past, embodied in the seventeenth-century mosque built under the reign of Safavid ruler Shah Abbas, the traditional redbrick buildings of imperial Elizavetpol', and the ubiquitous apartment blocks so characteristic of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods. Monumental construction projects, most notably a new philharmonic, dwarf the former administrative buildings of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR) of 1918 that now serve as the offices of a local agricultural university. Aside from several mosques, virtually the only living proof of the city's multi-confessional heritage is the sole functioning Russian Orthodox church that now serves a much smaller congregation than it did in the late nineteenth century. Another former church (presumably Orthodox) located across the river remains a puppet theater and performance hall just as it was during the Soviet era.

Meanwhile, taboo aspects of the city's history have been deliberately erased. Evidence of Armenians' residence in Kirovabad has been wiped almost completely from the historical record. In the former Armenian quarter, streets named after prominent Armenians such as the Bolshevik Stepan Shaumian (leader of the Baku Commune of 1918) and the poets Vahan Terian and Hovhannes Tumanyan have been altered, leaving few reminders of the historical Armenian presence in the city besides the aforementioned churches.²⁹⁰ Such symbolic toponymic changes

exaltation of political figures is virtually unheard of today. Evgenii, group interview with author, Yerevan, September 2, 2014.

²⁹⁰ See Introduction. The Armenian street names are taken from the Kirovabad city map (see beginning of thesis) inside the front cover of Grisha Oganezov and Hranush Kharatyan, *The Self-Defense of Kirovabad Armenians in*

occurred across post-Soviet Eurasia in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, but in Azerbaijan, the flight of Armenians as a result of the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh has also facilitated the nationalization of urban space.²⁹¹ Ganja is awash with new and old monuments that stake a symbolic claim on the city as a mono-ethnic space. Constructing new narratives about Ganja's past has entailed narrowing the historical viewfinder to Azerbaijani figures alone, for recognizing the role of Armenians in civic life and their later fate would be tantamount to treason. The defamation campaign launched against the Azerbaijani writer Akram Aylisli—whose controversial recent novel, *Stone Dreams*, implicated Azerbaijanis in crimes against Armenians at the end of the Soviet period—is a telling example of the intolerance toward dissenting voices.²⁹² The implication is that even fictionalized accounts should not contradict narratives undergirding state sovereignty or pose uncomfortable questions about the past.

Interestingly, one of the distinguishing features of Azerbaijani narratives today is the preponderance of remote historical figures in the national pantheon. Although the idea of Azerbaijanis as a distinct ethnic group did not crystallize until the early twentieth century, Azerbaijani historians have claimed prominent figures from earlier epochs to demonstrate the continuity of the Azerbaijani nation since the medieval era. Among the more significant appropriations is that of Shah Ismail (Khatai)—a sixteenth-century ruler of the Safavid Empire and an archrival of Ottoman sultan Süleyman I—whose bust is prominently displayed outside the

1988-1989 through the Eyes of Witnesses. Shaumian Street has been rechristened Nariman Narimanov in honor of the Azerbaijani Soviet leader who died in 1925.

²⁹¹ For a recent discussion of the purge of Azerbaijani toponyms from Nagorno Karabakh since 1994, see Sebastian Muth, "War, language removal and self-identification in the linguistic landscapes of Nagorno-Karabakh," *Nationalities Papers* 42.1 (2014): 63-87. For a thorough study of symbolic mapping in Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh, see Laurence Broers and Gerard Toal, "Cartographic Exhibitionism? Visualizing the Territory of Armenia and Karabakh," *Problems of Post-Communism* 60.3 (May-June 2015): 16-35.

²⁹² Shahin Abbasov, "Azerbaijan: Writer Buckling Under Strain of Literary Controversy," *Eurasianet*, February 14, 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66556>.

Ganja branch of Azerbaijan's National Academy of Sciences.²⁹³ The most revered figure, however, is the medieval Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi, whose alleged birth in Ganja in 1141 transformed him into a local celebrity and an emblem of Azerbaijani culture long promoted by the Soviet government. In addition to his imposing mausoleum complex astride the highway to Baku, Nizami is a ubiquitous feature of Ganja's urban landscape. From monuments dedicated to the poet and his famous epics to portraits on minibuses and pedestrian underpasses, the cult of Nizami permeates the built environment and serves as a constant reminder of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage and historical greatness.²⁹⁴ The larger-than-life presence of Nizami not only attests to the long-term success of Soviet "nativization" policies initiated in the 1920s; it also illustrates how references to the distant past and narratives of ethnogenesis are used to strengthen claims to nation and statehood.²⁹⁵

A tour through the Ganja State Museum of Local Lore reveals many of the major themes that have come to dominate Azerbaijani historiography in the post-Soviet era. Visitors are first guided through exhibits on the ground floor featuring artifacts dating from the Bronze Age through the early modern period. Here the installations related to the allegedly proto-Azerbaijani state of Caucasian Albania seem to suggest that Azerbaijan's history extends far back into antiquity. Guests are then escorted up the stairs past a poster entitled "Our Ancient History" to the second floor, which is devoted almost exclusively to the twentieth century and the events that

²⁹³ Zaur Gasimov, "History-Writing and History-Making in Azerbaijan," in *Historiography and Nation-Building among Turkic Populations*, ed. Birgit N. Schlyter (Istanbul and Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2014), 77.

²⁹⁴ Similarly, the government of Uzbekistan has attempted to reclaim Timur as a glorious historical figure for the purposes of nation and state building. See Laura L. Adams, "Mapping the Landscape of National Identity in Uzbekistan," in *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 38-44.

²⁹⁵ Indeed, as one scholar has argued, "the legitimacy and prestige of scores of leaders of post-Soviet states [...] rely heavily on perceived antiquity and historical 'glory' of the state." See Shahin Mustafayev, "The History of Sovereignty in Azerbaijan: A Preliminary Survey of Basic Approaches," in *Caucasus Paradigms*, eds. Bruce Grant and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, 95.

forged the Azerbaijani nation. Beginning with a room dedicated to the short-lived Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (ADR) established in May 1918, the following chambers catalogue the triumphs and tragedies that have befallen Azerbaijan, including participation in the Second World War and collective traumas such as the Soviet crackdown on pro-independence demonstrators in Baku on January 20, 1990 and the Khojaly massacre of February 26, 1992. A painting (See Figure 17) featuring a beastly Mikhail Gorbachev impaling Azerbaijan—portrayed as a bleeding eagle with the Absheron Peninsula as its beak—stands across from a wall of portraits of Azerbaijani “martyrs” who perished in the country’s struggle for independence. Especially telling is a series of panels detailing various Armenian atrocities against Azerbaijanis from 1905 to 1992, accompanied by text dripping with blood and grisly images of mutilated corpses. The underlying narrative is clear: Azerbaijan has long suffered at the hands of malicious Armenian aggressors whose deeds, in the words of one local tour guide, amount to nothing less than an “Armenian terror.”²⁹⁶ Nowhere is there any mention of Armenians’ role in the development of Soviet Kirovabad, but one can deduce from the gratuitous display of Armenian massacres that Armenians are anathema in a national museum.



Fig. 17: Painting of Mikhail Gorbachev (author’s photo, August 2014)

²⁹⁶ Conversation with tour guide, Ganja State Museum of Local Lore, Ganja, August 8, 2014.

The next, and largest, room pays homage to former president Heydar Aliyev, documenting his political career in hagiographic style and securing his place as the undisputed father of the nation. The proclaimed wisdom of Aliyev is showcased in separate photo collages under titles such as “advancements in village economics under Heydar Aliyev’s leadership in the years 1970-82” and “Azerbaijani diplomacy in the Muslim world,” suggesting that only under his guidance did Azerbaijan manage to modernize successfully. This representation of Aliyev as the national savior reflects what one Azerbaijani scholar has described as an industry of “pseudo-scientific publications” immortalizing Aliyev’s life “as an ‘Azerbaijani Atatürk’” whose unwavering devotion to the homeland serves as an example for all patriotic citizens.²⁹⁷

The Homeland Under Siege

The account of Azerbaijan’s history presented in Ganja’s museum closely resembles the narrative featured in officially sanctioned textbooks. Given the pervasive hostility toward Armenians in Azerbaijan, it is unsurprising that anti-Armenian hysteria has also infiltrated the sphere of education. As Charles King has observed, in Azerbaijan, as elsewhere in the South Caucasus, conflicts “are memorialized as victorious wars of national liberation or tragic struggles for the integrity of the fatherland. An entire generation of schoolchildren has grown up imbibing one or another of these narratives.”²⁹⁸ In addition to highly partisan textbooks, other symbolic reminders articulate themes of victory and victimhood in schools. Photo collages dedicated to “our martyrs” (*şəhidlərimiz*) are not an uncommon sight in primary schools where pupils receive indoctrination about the historical injustices perpetrated against their nation.²⁹⁹ In a public university in Ganja, a paper listing the territories that fell to Armenian forces in the early 1990s

²⁹⁷ Gasimov, “History-Writing and History-Making in Azerbaijan,” 79, 80.

²⁹⁸ Charles King, “Time of Troubles,” in *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 219.

²⁹⁹ Based on personal observations at a primary school in the town of Lahıc, January 2013.

is attached to the central bulletin board as a reminder of the violations of their country's territorial integrity. Evidently, administrators and teachers envision the classroom as an environment conducive to molding and mobilizing pupils to serve the state.

Accordingly, the following section examines excerpts from a twentieth-century history textbook approved by Azerbaijan's Ministry of Education in 2009 that remains mandatory reading in high schools. Though only one example, it illustrates larger themes in Azerbaijani historiography in condensed form and reflects the attitudes of large segments of Azerbaijan's population toward the past. Unsurprisingly for a society in a state of national mobilization to reclaim lost territories, government-sanctioned textbooks are designed with the intent to inculcate patriotism in Azerbaijan's young postwar generation, at the expense of historical objectivity. Textbooks therefore provide an interesting prism through which one can trace the genesis and dissemination of historical myths. Although Armenian textbooks will not be addressed here, it is important to note that educators across the border also strive to instill national pride in their students. According to the Armenian respondent Evgenii, however, Armenian histories are not propagandistic because they advance fact-based arguments based on documentary evidence.³⁰⁰ Similarly, another researcher has claimed that Armenian textbooks "do not use any hate speech or negative ethnic stereotypes regarding the Armenian forces' adversaries," which, if accurate, suggests that the trauma of the Nagorno Karabakh war has had a far more profound effect on historical writing in Azerbaijan.³⁰¹ Moving chronologically, this content analysis illustrates how Azerbaijani history has been filtered through the distorting lenses

³⁰⁰ Evgenii, interview with author, Yerevan, September 4, 2014.

³⁰¹ Mikayel Zolyan, "Writing the History of the Present: The Post-Soviet Period in Armenian History Textbooks," in *The South Caucasus and Turkey: History Lessons of the 20th Century*, ed. Sergey Rumyantsev (Tbilisi: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2012), 165.

of conflict and nationalist discourse, producing a crude narrative in which Armenians are represented as the implacable enemy.

The final history textbook for students in the eleventh grade covers the tumultuous century following the October Revolution of 1917 through the end of Heydar Aliyev's tenure as president in 2003. As in previous volumes, the narrative is triumphalist, emphasizing Azerbaijan's fierce struggle to retain its independence and territorial sovereignty despite the Bolsheviks' and Armenians' ceaseless efforts to pursue their own geopolitical agendas. The inherently peaceful nature of Azerbaijanis and their inclination toward reconciliation and dialogue is juxtaposed alongside the aggressive behavior of their belligerent neighbors, especially Armenians. In the end, what emerges is an ethnocentric narrative of dogged resistance and national survival, from the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic of 1918—touted as the “first democratic republic in the whole East and in the Turkic-Islamic world”—to the reestablishment of independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.³⁰²

The first chapter begins in 1917-18 with a discussion of the power vacuum in Baku in which various political factions were vying for supremacy, including the so-called “Baku Commissars.” Once lionized as Bolshevik martyrs in the Soviet press, this group of twenty-six Bolshevik officers who established the Baku Commune in 1918 but were later captured and executed are portrayed in post-Soviet Azerbaijani history as a conspiratorial gang of murderers. After outlining the Commune's supposedly anti-Azerbaijani policies, the textbook identifies the Armenian Bolshevik Stepan Shaumian as the leader who “essentially gave instructions to start the genocide of Azerbaijanis” in March 1918.³⁰³ Although thousands of Muslims did indeed lose their lives during the so-called “March Days,” the textbook characterizes the Commune's actions

³⁰² Tair Kaffarov, et al., *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana 11*, 27. “Это была первая демократическая республика на всем Востоке и в тюркско-исламском мире.”

³⁰³ *Idem*, 11. “...Шаумян по существу дал указание о начале геноцида азербайджанцев.”

as a full-fledged campaign of terror that resulted in the death of “over 50,000 Azerbaijanis.”³⁰⁴ Overturning the established Soviet version of events, which downplayed ethnic violence in Baku, Azerbaijani historians have radically reassessed March 1918 since independence in 1991, emphasizing victimhood and perpetuating the “historical myth about the ongoing and ‘eternal’ feud between Azerbaijani and Armenian peoples.”³⁰⁵ Yet Azerbaijani wrongdoings are conspicuously absent in this one-sided account of Azerbaijan’s war of independence. Reprisals against Baku’s Armenian population that accompanied the conquest of the city by Ottoman commander Nuri Pasha’s forces in September 1918 are omitted, for such facts would taint the image of Azerbaijan’s nascent democracy.

Following the trend in many post-Soviet states, the Soviet “occupation” that began on April 28, 1920 is depicted as an alien imposition that favored Armenians, as evidenced by the decision to grant the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous *Oblast’* (NKAO) autonomy.³⁰⁶ Azerbaijanis’ heroic contributions to the Great Patriotic War and the development of heavy industry are among the few topics viewed in a positive light. Contrary to revisionist scholarship that has challenged the image of the Soviet Union as another Russian Empire that forcefully imposed its will upon reluctant groups, the textbook revives familiar tropes of oppression, claiming that Soviet leaders displayed a “dismissive attitude toward national values, traditions and at times banned them” while “a policy of mass Russification was carried out.”³⁰⁷ In order to consolidate power, so the argument goes, Soviet leaders pursued blatantly anti-Azerbaijani

³⁰⁴ Idem, 13. “За это время было убито свыше 50 тысяч азербайджанцев.”

³⁰⁵ İlham Abbasov, “The History of Azerbaijan: Deconstructing the ‘Age-Old Friendship’ and the ‘Deadly Feud’ Myths,” in *The South Caucasus and Turkey: History Lessons of the 20th Century*, 22.

³⁰⁶ Conspiracy theories about Moscow’s divide-and-rule strategies in the South Caucasus abound in Azerbaijan, but the latest studies of the formation of NKAO have challenged these ideas. See Arsène Saparov, “Why Autonomy? The Making of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region 1918-1925,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64.2 (March 2012): 281-323.

³⁰⁷ Kaffarov, et al. 70. “Было пренебрежительное отношение к национальным ценностям, традициям а порой их запрещение,” and “проводилась политика массовой русификации.”

policies by elevating the Russian language, suppressing Islam, exploiting natural resources, and appointing non-Azerbaijani officials to positions in the Communist Party bureaucracy. Nowhere is there any mention of the Soviet Union's active promotion of national languages, cultures, and territories that characterized the period of *korenizatsiia* ("nativization") in the 1920s and early 1930s—precisely the decade in which most Muslims in the Azerbaijani SSR came to identify themselves as Azerbaijanis.³⁰⁸ Turning to the post-1945 period, the authors accuse the Soviet leadership of falsifying history and discriminating against Azerbaijani officials since "the Soviet government did not trust Azerbaijanis, and representatives of other nations were appointed to leading posts. They displayed a chauvinistic attitude toward our people and aimed to eliminate national cadres."³⁰⁹ Azerbaijan's postwar Stalinist leader, Mir Jafar Bagirov, is one of the few Azerbaijani officials treated with contempt in the textbook, but even his brutal tactics, such as maintaining loyalty through fear and blackmail (*kompromat*), are minimized in comparison to the actions of his Armenian and Georgian subordinates.³¹⁰

The scapegoating of Armenians as the source of Azerbaijan's woes points to the obvious influence of contemporary politics on historical writing. At one point, the author of the textbook posits a direct connection between Armenians' past designs on Azerbaijan and the current occupation of Azerbaijani territory when he poses the following question to students in the reading comprehension section: "In what respect do you see a similarity between the territorial claims of Armenians in the ADR period and in the modern era?"³¹¹ Framing the question in such a way encourages the reader to draw false parallels, ignoring specific actors as well as the

³⁰⁸ Idem, 68.

³⁰⁹ Idem, 120. "Советское правительство не доверяло азербайджанцам, на ведущие посты назначались представители других наций. Они проявляли шовинистическое отношение к нашему народу стремились к уничтожению национальных кадров."

³¹⁰ Yoram Gorlizki, "Rise of the Sub-State Dictators: Soviet Regional Leaders after World War II," (Lecture, CEU, Budapest, Hungary, November 25, 2014).

³¹¹ Kaffarov et al., *Istoriia Azerbaidzhana* 11, 47. "В чем вы видите сходство между территориальными притязаниями армян в период АДР и в современную эпоху?"

historical context. Just as some Armenians regard the Azerbaijanis responsible for atrocities during the Nagorno Karabakh conflict (1988-94) as the same “Turks” who butchered their ancestors in eastern Anatolia in 1915, so too are some Azerbaijanis inclined to see all Armenians as “Dashnaks” who have terrorized and slaughtered Azerbaijanis since the pre-revolutionary period. Indeed, the textbook makes frequent references to “Bolshevik-Dashnak forces,” “Armenian bandits,” “Armenian separatists,” “Armenian aggressors,” “Armenian fascists,” and simply “Armenians” without clearly distinguishing armed personnel from civilians, thereby associating all Armenians with violent behavior. As one scholar has observed in regard to these textbooks, Azerbaijanis and other nations are conceived “as solidary and homogeneous communities” that act in predetermined ways, and consequently, “ethnic boundaries are often represented as impenetrable and in conflict,” especially in the case of Armenians.³¹²

Representing Armenians as the timeless enemy serves as a prop on which to build a teleological narrative that might otherwise lack coherence. Armenians’ brutal acts, in other words, provide an underlying structure that pulls together disparate events into one linear story. From supposedly sabotaging an anti-Bolshevik rebellion in Ganja in May 1920 to organizing the execution of Azerbaijani intellectuals during the Great Terror of 1937-38 to facilitating the mass deportation of Azerbaijanis from the Armenian SSR (referred to as “western Azerbaijan”) to the Azerbaijani SSR from 1948-1953, Armenians appear as criminals who repeatedly victimized innocent Azerbaijanis in order to fulfill the dream of establishing a “Greater Armenia.” According to the authors, the fact that Armenians ethnically cleansed Azerbaijanis from their republic during the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is simply further confirmation of their built-in hatred toward the “Turk.”

³¹² Sevil Huseynova, “Azerbaijan in the Late 20th – Early 21st Centuries: Ethnic Boundaries in the Context of Relations with ‘Neighbors,’” in *The South Caucasus and Turkey: History Lessons of the 20th Century*, 124, 142.

If the first half of the textbook constructs Azerbaijani history vis-à-vis Armenians, the second half of the textbook serves as a panegyric to Heydar Aliyev. In accordance with prevailing national sentiment, he is presented as a faultless messiah figure who saved Azerbaijan from total collapse by returning to power during the disastrous Nagorno Karabakh war in the early 1990s. Since his political debut in 1969 as the head of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, so the authors maintain, Aliyev acted as a stabilizing force, singlehandedly reviving a faltering economy, restoring order amidst political turmoil, and building Azerbaijan's reputation on the international stage. In the end, one can reasonably conclude that Heydar's ascension is a metaphor for Azerbaijan in the twentieth century. Despite innumerable hardships and outside meddling at every turn, the nation ultimately succeeded in gaining independence—the culmination of a centuries-long struggle against foreign occupiers that persists to this day. The reproduction of this myth in classrooms, the media, and in daily conversations demonstrates how many Azerbaijanis have internalized this narrative, thus ensuring the longevity of Aliyev's cult of personality and his place in historical memory.

The Invisible “Other”

To conclude, among the legacies of the Kirovabad pogroms is the disappearance and persistence of Armenians, their absence and omnipresence in Ganja today. They have long since fled the scene, but talk of Armenians still abounds. From state television broadcasts to public memorials to classroom history lectures, Armenians remain a ubiquitous subject of conversation among Azerbaijanis. Paradoxically, for a nationalizing state fashioning itself largely in opposition to Armenians, they remain fundamental to its existence. They frequently appear as the ultimate source of the country's woes and the cause of every ceasefire violation on the militarized frontline—as aggressors relentless in their quest to subjugate Azerbaijan.

Commenting on the Azerbaijani government's fixation on Armenians, the former engineer Evgenii incisively remarked, "It is advantageous for the authorities to have an enemy out of reach [...] because one can always divert attention toward an external enemy."³¹³ Indeed, one wonders what would fill the void if Armenians did not occupy the spotlight so often. Out of sight but by no means out of mind, Armenians are at once invisible and ever-present in Ganja where they once lived alongside today's residents. Unapproachable yet close at hand, they continue to haunt the local population that both nourished and exiled them.

³¹³ Evgenii, interview with author, Yerevan, September 4, 2014. "Теперь выгодно властям иметь врага вне пределов [...] потому что всегда можно отвлечь внимание на внешнего врага."

5. CODA: BEYOND KIROVABAD

Assembling the traces of a past shrouded in silence has left many gaps. In the end, much remains unknown about the pre-1988 history and violent unraveling of Kirovabad given research restrictions and the absence of open dialogue in Azerbaijan. However, the researcher must learn to circumvent these obstacles by focusing on what is left unsaid and by consulting the most abundant source of all: Kirovabadians themselves. Listening to their voices, this thesis has shed light on the social environment of one city and its disintegration in hopes that other scholars will continue to uncover stories that further complicate our understanding of multiethnic communities and violence in the late Soviet Union. The individuals featured in previous chapters represent a tiny fraction of the population that lived in Kirovabad, but their recollections are indispensable for gaining deeper insights into ordinary people's lived experiences in Soviet Azerbaijan. For all the hazards of oral history, personal testimonies are virtually the only means of gathering important details overlooked in macro-scale historical accounts that rarely penetrate to the level of the individual. In bringing their stories to light, I have juxtaposed and weaved together disparate voices to trace the history of a city that, to my knowledge, has been told only from mutually exclusive angles until now.

While dwelling on lives lived in a single city, this thesis has endeavored to tell a much larger story with implications that transcend the immediate setting of Kirovabad. As a seasoned practitioner of oral history, Jeffrey Veidlinger, aptly noted, localized studies “seek to do more than just add local color, but also force us to rethink fundamental assumptions about the operation of society.”³¹⁴ The motivation behind writing these chapters has been to understand how and why mixed communities fall apart. Above all, I have tried to illustrate how the

³¹⁴ Veidlinger, “Introduction,” in *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, xxii.

unmaking of Kirovabad or any other city is a complex process that requires detailed contextualization and a great deal of “thick description” to capture the constellation of factors that converge to produce violence. Positing ethnic hatreds as an adequate explanation is an intellectual shortcut that takes one only so far. Looking locally shows that this reductionist view of the social world does not hold up under further scrutiny, and it allows one to reconstruct the events and mechanisms at work on the ground that would otherwise escape notice. I have tried to demonstrate that Kirovabad (and Azerbaijan and the Caucasus more generally) was not always a hotbed of nationalism waiting to ignite, and even when it did, it was generally for specific reasons that had arisen shortly beforehand. The larger implication of these findings is that one must approach an event such as the Kirovabad pogroms incrementally, analyzing the buildup, execution, and aftermath to identify the circumstances, pinpoint the actors, and assess the results.

This project represents an initial foray rather than the final word on Kirovabad and the 1988 pogroms. At the very least, these chapters aim to contribute to a much-needed discussion about the recent past in a region where national historiographies inhabit parallel universes. Fortunately, hermetically sealed and fortified land borders have not severed all contact between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. As the Baku pensioner Aynur explained, “in Azerbaijan there are even such women who today, notwithstanding the fact that Armenians live in some other country, exchange words. There are men like this too. Who didn’t forget each other.”³¹⁵ Such cases are rare, but they reveal that Armenians and Azerbaijanis are not monolithic actors or prisoners of their society’s collective memories that demonize their neighbors across the border. All respondents featured in this study have revealed, albeit unwittingly, their own richly layered memories in which feelings of trauma, loss, nostalgia, indignation, mistrust, and sympathy

³¹⁵ Aynur, interview with author, Baku, August 24, 2014. “Даже есть в Азербайджане такие женщины, которые на сегодняшний день несмотря что, они армяне где-то в другом месте живут, в государстве, они переговариваются. До сегодняшнего дня. Мужчины тоже есть такие. Которые не забыли друг друга.”

coexist and intermingle. Some respondents offered nuanced responses that went well beyond discursive norms and taboos in their communities, while at the same time they perpetuated essentialized images of the “other” in the course of the same conversation. Some testimonies were, without a doubt, worded carefully for the recorder or adhered to predictable scripts, but many responses were not rehearsed statements, and they challenge the assumption that individuals who live in societies characterized by “high levels of groupness” necessarily think in predetermined ways.³¹⁶ Throughout this thesis, I have tried to evaluate the content of respondents’ reflections, while paying particular attention to “how individuals and communities construct their pasts and understand their history.”³¹⁷ It is my sincere hope that by providing space for the perspectives of Kirovabadians here this thesis can begin to bridge the chasm between their conflicting memories.

³¹⁶ Brubaker, “Ethnicity without Groups,” in *Ethnicity without Groups*, 19.

³¹⁷ Veidlinger, “Conclusion,” in *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 282.

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